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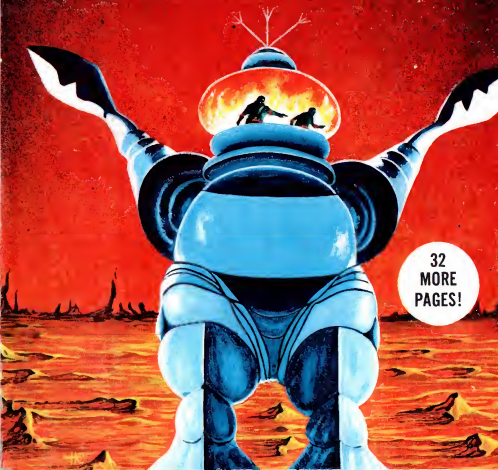
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EDITORIAL

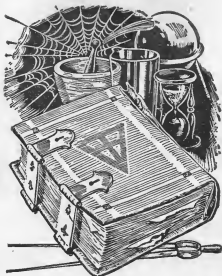
ANYONE who feels like taking a pot shot at science fiction can now do so with a minimum of effort. Simply choose one of several deadly weapons developed by critics over the past forty years—ever since the first all-science-fiction magazines began to appear. The oldest way—still widely used by mainstream critics—is to ignore us altogether. Of course, if that doesn't seem quite fair, you could sample a few magazines and anthologies, dismiss it all, and *then* ignore us altogether—this time with a clear conscience.

But such indifference begins to seem a trifle foolish nowadays—when S-F in paperback, hardcover, and magazine form sells steadily and just won't go away. So something more lethal is needed, something like those charges (in the 1950's) that modern S-F was all played out, its wonder gone. Remember how it went? Modern writers just couldn't compete with nuclear bombs and orbiting satellites, so they retreated behind slick, sophisticated writing that would ultimately fail. But what actually happened? Well—more than a decade later—we can now see that some pretty wonderful stories were on the way (from gifted writers like Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, and Cordwainer Smith), stories filled with a *new* kind of fictional magic more suited to the time. Apparently, then, wonder wears many faces.

Even if neglect and nostalgia fail to bag modern science fiction, however, you can always try the very latest weapon (introduced by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—in the staid pages of *The New York Times Book Review*). For this one, you don't ignore or condemn; you actually write some science-fiction stories yourself. Then, after a few of your books win critical recognition—not as S-F, of course, but as “literature”—you decide it's time to pack up and leave the field altogether, but not before taking time to fire point-blank at those who knew you when (the majority of S-F readers and writers, whom you now call tasteless, even childless). Naturally you don't forget to praise a handful of ageing S-F writers, but that won't fool anyone—we know you'll be aiming for the heart.

But so are we—in an entirely different way—because we know that the parting shot, like all the others, ultimately misfires, for where can expatriates go to find a field more exciting, a community of readers, writers, and editors more curious, more informed, and more vocal than this one? Nowhere. That's why *we're* staying.—JR

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entrusted
to a
few**



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When Cordwainer Smith's unforgettable "Scanners Live in Vain" first appeared back in 1948, the science-fiction field was startled and delighted by the power of its writing and the originality of its idea—that eventually man might have to be mechanically "regulated" if his mind and body are to stand up to the stresses of space travel. Now—almost two decades later—Smith's name has come to stand for an equally fascinating series of strangely beautiful stories about a future universe ruled by the absolute Lords of the Instrumentality. Each of these wonderful tales (think of "Drunkboat" and "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard") is marked by a uniquely lyrical style, an indescribable quality that is particularly strong in "On the Sand Planet," the newest episode in this long saga of the future. This time Casher O'Neill returns to his home world of Mizzer determined to free it from tyranny, but before long that mission fades before a far more difficult problem—how to find meaning in life when he has accomplished everything he set out to do. For Casher O'Neill the answer lies somewhere far beyond the almost inaccessible reaches of the Ninth Nile—and he must journey past lands where one must wear iron shoes—because the ground is covered with volcanic glass. . . .

On the Sand Planet

By CORDWAINER SMITH

THIS is the story of the sand planet itself, Mizzer, which became free of hope when the tyrant Wedder imposed the reign of terror and virtue. This climaxes the romance of Casher O'Neill, of whom strange things were told, from the day of blood

Illustrated by JACK GAUGHAN

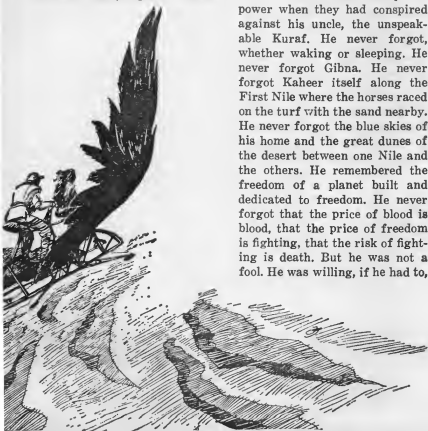


in which he fled from his native city of Kaheer until he came back to Kaheer and ended the shedding of blood for all the rest of his years.

Casher had gone to strange places meanwhile. He had visited Pontoppidan, the gem planet, and had there met the beautiful Genevieve. He wandered strange paths. He had gone even to Olympia where the blind brokers walked their blind children past the numbered, squared clouds.

He had ventured even to the end of things, to the storm planet of Henriada where endless tornadoes tore across the watered swamps and only the domain of Murray Madigan stood fast against the ecological and economic ruin brought about by the abandonment of man.

Everywhere that Casher had gone he had had only one thought in his mind—deliverance of his home country from the tyrants whom he himself had let slip into power when they had conspired against his uncle, the unspeakable Kuraf. He never forgot, whether waking or sleeping. He never forgot Gibna. He never forgot Kaheer itself along the First Nile where the horses raced on the turf with the sand nearby. He never forgot the blue skies of his home and the great dunes of the desert between one Nile and the others. He remembered the freedom of a planet built and dedicated to freedom. He never forgot that the price of blood is blood, that the price of freedom is fighting, that the risk of fighting is death. But he was not a fool. He was willing, if he had to,



to risk his own death; but he wanted odds on the battle which would not merely snare him home, like a rabbit to be caught in a steel trap, by the police of the dictator Wedder.

And then, toward the end of his way through life, he had met the solution of his crusade without knowing it at first. He had come to the end of all things, all problems, all worries. He had also come to the end of all ordinary hope. He met T'ruth. T'ruth looked like a little girl but she was almost a thousand years old. T'ruth looked dainty, female, pleasant, immature, alert, inquisitive; she had been imprinted with the personality of the dead Agatha Madigan: the dead Agatha Madigan had been the greatest hypnotist and strategist of them all and had earned the frightful name of the Hechizera of Gonfalon, from the battle fought at that place: that place was the only location in all space where a fully armed fleet fled from phantoms which poured out of the mind of a single resolute woman: that place was doomed: now this quality of doom belonged to Casher O'Neill, to do with as he pleased.

It pleased him to return to Mizzer, to enter Kaheer itself, and to confront Wedder.

Why should he not come? It was his home and he thirsted for revenge. More than revenge he

hungered for justice. He had lived many years for this hour and this hour came.

He entered the north gate of Kaheer.

I

Casher walked into Mizzer wearing the uniform of a medical technician in Wedder's own military service. He had assumed the appearance and the name of a dead man named Bindaoud. Casher walked with nothing more than his hands as weapons, and his hands swung freely at the end of his arms. Only the steadfastness of his feet, the resolute grace with which he took each step, betrayed his purpose. The crowds in the street saw him pass but they did not see him. They looked at a man, and they did not realize that they saw their own history going step by step through their various streets. Within moments after Casher O'Neill had entered the city of Kaheer he knew that he was being followed. He could feel it.

He glanced around.

He had learned in his many years of fighting and struggle, on strange planets, countless rules of unremembered hazards. To be alert, he knew what this was. It was a suchesache. The suchesache at the moment had taken the shape of a small witless boy, some eight years old, who had two trails of stained mucus pour-

ing down from his nostrils, who had forever-open lips ready to call with the harsh bark of idiocy, who had eyes that did not focus right. Casher O'Neill knew that this was a boy and not a boy. It was a hunting and searching device often employed by police lords when they presumed to make themselves into kings or tyrants, a device which flitted from shape to shape, from child to butterfly or bird, which moved with the suchesache and watched the victim; watching, saying nothing, following. He hated the suchesache and was tempted to throw all the powers of his strange mind at it so that the boy might die and the machine hidden within it might perish. But he knew that this would lead to a cascade of fire and splashing of blood. He had already seen blood in Kaheer long ago; he had no wish to see it in the city again.

Instead he stopped the deliberate pacing with which he had followed his cadenced walk through the street. He turned calmly and kindly and looked at the boy, and he said to the boy and to the hideous machine within the boy, "Come along with me, I'm going straightway to the palace and you would like to see that."

The machine, confronted, had no further choice.

The idiot boy put his hand in Casher's hand, and somehow or

other Casher O'Neill managed to resume the rolling deliberate march which had marked so many of his years while keeping a grip on the hand of the demented child who skipped beside him. Casher could still feel the machine watching him from within the eyes of the boy. He did not care; he was not afraid of guns; he could stop them. He was not afraid of poison; he could resist it. He was not afraid of hypnotism; he could take it in and spit it back. He was not afraid of fear; he had been on Henriada. He had come home through space-three. There was nothing left to fear.

Straightway he went to the palace. The midday gleamed in the bright yellow sun which rode the skies of Kaheer. The white-washed walls in the arabesque design stayed as they had been for thousands of years. Only at the door was he challenged and the sentry hesitated because Casher said, "I am Bindaoud, loyal servant to Colonel Wedder, and this is a child of the streets whom I propose to heal in order to show our good Colonel Wedder a fair demonstration of my powers."

The sentry said something into a little box which sat in the wall.

Casher passed freely. The suchesache trotted beside him. As he went through the corri-

dors, laid with rich rugs, military and civilians moving back and forth, he felt happy. This was not the palace of Wedder though Wedder lived in it. It was his own palace. He, Casher, had been born in it. He knew it. He knew every corridor.

The changes of the years were very few. Casher turned to his left into an open courtyard. He smelled the smell of salt water and the sand and the horses nearby. He sighed a little at the familiarity of it, the good welcome and the kind welcome. He turned right again and ascended long long stairs. Each step was carpeted in a different design.

Here his uncle Kuraf had stood at the head of these very stairs while men and women, boys and girls were brought to him to become toys of his evil pleasures. Kuraf had been too fat to walk down these stairs to greet them. He always let the captives come up to himself and to his den of pleasures. Casher reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

This was no den of pleasures now.

It was the office of Colonel Wedder. He, Casher, had reached it.

How strange it was to reach this office, this target of all his hopes, this one fevered pinpoint in all the universe for which his revenge had thirsted until he

thought himself mad. He had thought of bombing this office from outer space, or of cutting it with a thin arc of a laser beam, or of poisoning it with chemicals, or of assaulting it with troops. He had thought of pouring fire on this building, or water. He had dreamed of making Mizzer free even at the price of the lovely city of Kaheer itself and of finding a small asteroid somewhere and crashing it in an interplanetary tragedy directly into the city itself so that the city, under the roar of that impact, would have blazed into thermodynamic incandescence and would have become a poison lake at the end of the Twelve Niles. He had thought of a thousand ways of entering the city and of destroying the city, merely in order to destroy Wedder.

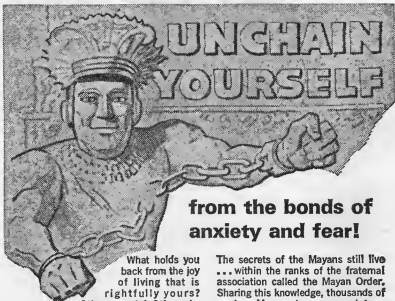
Now he was here. So too was Wedder.

Wedder did not know that he, Casher O'Neill, had come back.

Even less did Wedder know who Casher O'Neill had become, the master of space, the traveler who traveled without ships, the vehicle for devices stranger than any mind on Mizzer had ever conceived.

Very calm, very relaxed, very quiet, very assured the doom which was Casher O'Neill walked into the antechamber of Wedder. Very modestly he asked for Wedder.

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The dictator happened to be free. He had changed little since Casher last saw him, a little older, a little fatter, a little wiser—all these perhaps. Casher was not sure. Every cell and filament in his living body had risen to the alert. He was ready to do the work for which the light-years had ached, for which the worlds had turned, and he knew that within an instant it would be done. He confronted Wedder, gave Wedder a modest, assured smile.

"Your servant, the technician Bindaoud, sir and colonel," said Casher O'Neill. Wedder looked at him strangely. He reached out his hand, and, even as their hands touched, Wedder said the last words he would ever say on his own.

Within that handclasp, Wedder spoke again and his voice was strange: "Who are you?"

Casher had dreamed that he would say, "I am Casher O'Neill come back from unimaginable distances to punish you," or that he would say, "I am Casher O'Neill and I have ridden starlanes for years upon years to find your destruction." Or he had even thought that he might say, "Surrender or die, Wedder; your time has come." Sometimes he had dreamed he would say, "Here, Wedder," and then show him the knife with which to take his blood.

Yet this was the climax and none of these things occurred.

The idiot boy with the machine within it stood at ease.

Casher O'Neill merely held Wedder's hand and said quite simply, "Your friend."

As he said that, he searched back and forth. He could feel inner eyes within his own head, eyes which did not move within the sockets of his face, eyes which he did not have and with which he could nevertheless see. These were the eyes of his perception. Quickly he adjusted the anatomy of Wedder, working kinesthetically, squeezing an artery there, pinching off a gland here. Here harden the tissue, through which the secretions of a given endocrine material had to come. In less time than it would take an ordinary doctor to describe the process, he had changed Wedder. Wedder had been tuned down like a radio with dials realigned, like a space ship with its locksheets reset.

The work which Casher had done was less than any pilot does in the course of an ordinary landing, but the piloting he had done was within the biochemical system of Wedder itself. And the changes which he had effected were irreversible.

The new Wedder was the old Wedder. The same mind. The same will, the same personality. Yet its permutations were differ-

ent. And its method of expression already slightly different. More benign. More tolerant. More calm, more human. Even a little corrupt as he smiled and said, "I remember you, now, Bindaoud. Can you help that boy?"

The supposed Bindaoud ran his hands over the boy. The boy wept with pain and shock for a moment. He wiped his dirty nose and upper lip on his sleeves. His eyes came into focus. His lips compressed. His mind burned brightly as its old worn channels became human instead of idiot. The suchesache machine knew it was out of place and fled for another refuge. The boy, given his brains but no words, no education yet, stood there and hiccupped with joy.

Wedder said very pleasantly, "That is remarkable. Is it all that you have to show me?"

"All," said Casher O'Neill; "you were not he."

He turned his back on Wedder and did so in perfect safety.

He knew Wedder would never kill another man.

Casher stopped at the door and looked back. He could tell from the posture of Wedder that that which had to be done had been done. That the changes within the man were larger than the man himself. That the planet was free and that his own work was indeed done. The suddenly frightened child which had lost

the suchesache followed him out of blind instinct.

The colonels and the staff officers did not know whether to salute or nod when they saw their chief stand at the doorway and wave with unexpected friendliness at Casher O'Neill as Casher descended the broad carpeted steps, the child stumbling behind him. At the further steps, Casher looked one last time at the enemy who had become almost a part of himself. There stood Wedder, the man of blood. And now he himself, Casher O'Neill, had expunged the blood, and had redone the past, had reshaped the future. All Mizzer was heading back to the openness and freedom which he had enjoyed in the time of the old Republic of the Twelve Niles. He walked on, shifting from one corridor to the other and using short cuts to the courtyards, until he came to the doorway to the palace. The sentry presented arms.

"At ease," said Casher. The man put down his gun.

Casher stood outside the palace, that palace which had been his uncle's, which had been his own, which had really been himself. He looked at the clear air of Mizzer. He looked at the clear blue skies which he had always loved. He looked at the world to which he had promised he would return, with justice, with venge-

ance, with thunder, with power. Thanks to the strange and subtle capacities which he had learned from the turtle-girl, T'ruth, hidden in her own world amid the storm-churned atmosphere of Henriada, he had not needed to fight.

Casher turned to the boy and said, "I am a sword which has been put into its scabbard. I am a pistol with the cartridges dropped out. I am a wirepoint with no battery behind it. I am a man but I am very empty."

The boy made strangled, confused sounds as though he were trying to think, to become himself, to make up for all the lost time he had spent in idiocy.

Casher acted on impulse. Curiously, he gave to the boy his own native speech of Kaheer. He felt his muscles go tight, shoulders, neck, fingertips, as he concentrated with the arts he had learned in the palace of Beauregard where the girl T'ruth governed almost-forever in the names of Mister and Owner Murray Madigan. He took the arts and memories he sought. He seized the boy roughly but tightly by the shoulders. He peered into frightened, crying eyes, and then in a single blast of thought he gave the boy speech, words, memory, ambition, skills. The boy stood there dazed.

At last the boy spoke and he said, "Who am I?"

Casher could not answer that one. He patted the child on the shoulder. He said, "Go back to the city and find out. I have other needs. I have to find out who I myself may be. Goodbye and peace be with you."

II

Casher remembered that his mother still lived here. He had often forgotten her. It would have been easier to forget her. Her name was Trihaep and it was she who had been sister to Kuraf. Where Kuraf had been vicious, she had been virtuous. Where Kuraf had sometimes been grateful, she had been thrifty and shift. Where Kuraf with all his evils had acquired a toleration for men and things and ideas, she remained set in the pattern of thought which her parents had long ago taught her.

Casher O'Neill did something he thought he would never do. He had never really even thought about doing it. It was too simple. He went home.

At the gate of the house, his mother's old servant knew him despite the change in his face, and she said, with a terrible awe in her voice, "It seems to me that I am looking at Casher O'Neill."

"I use the name, Bindaoud," said Casher, "but I am Casher O'Neill. Let me in and tell my mother that I am here."

He went into the private apartment of his mother. The old furniture was still there. The polished bricabrac of a hundred ages, the old paintings and the old mirrors, and the dead people whom he had never known, represented by their pictures and their mementoes. He felt just as ill at ease as he felt when he was a small boy when he had visited the same room, before his uncle came to take him to the palace.

His mother came in. She had not changed.

He half-thought that she would reach out her arms to him and cry in a deliberately modern passion, "My baby! My precious! Come back to me!"

She did no such thing. She looked at him coldly as though he were a complete stranger.

She said to him, "You don't look like my son, but I suppose that you are. You have made trouble enough in your time. Are you making trouble now?"

"I make no malicious trouble, Mother, and I never have," said Casher, "no matter what you may think of me. I did what I had to do. I did what was right."

"Betraying your uncle was right? Letting down our family was right? Disgracing us all was right? You must be a fool to talk like this. I heard that you were a wanderer, that you had great adventures, and had seen many worlds. You don't sound any



different to me. You're an old man. You almost seem as old as I do. I had a baby once, but how could that be you? You are an enemy of the house of Kuraf O'Neill. You're one of the people who brought it down in blood. But they came from outside with their principles and their thoughts and their dreams of power. And you stole from inside like a cur. You opened the door and you let in ruin. Who are you that I should forgive you?"

"I do not ask your forgiveness, Mother," said Casher. "I do not even ask your understanding. I have other places to go and other things yet to do. May peace be upon you."

She stared at him, said nothing:

He went on: "You will find Mizzer a pleasanter place to live in since I talked to Wedder this morning."

"You talked to Wedder?" cried she, "and he did not kill you?"

"He did not know me."

"Wedder did not know you?"

"I assure you, mother, he did not know me."

"You must be a very powerful man, my son. Perhaps you can repair the fortune of the house of Kuraf O'Neill after all the harm you have done and all the heart-break you brought to my brother. I suppose you know your wife's dead?"

"I had heard that," said Casher. "I hope she died instantly in an accident and without pain."

"Of course it was an accident. How else do people die these days? She and her husband tried out one of those new boats, and it overturned."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't there."

"I know that. I know that perfectly well, my son. You were outside there so that I had to look up at the stars with fear. I could look up in the sky and stare for the man who was my son lurking up there with blood and ruin. With vengeance upon vengeance heaped upon all of us, just because he thought he knew what was right. I've been afraid

of you for a long long time, and I thought if I ever met you again I would fear you with my whole heart. You don't quite seem to be what I expected, Casher. Perhaps I can like you. Perhaps I can even love you as a mother should. Not that it matters. You and I are too old now."

"I'm not working on that kind of mission any longer, mother. I have been in this old room long enough, and I wish you well. But I wish many other people well, too. I have done what I had to do. Perhaps I had better say goodbye now and much later perhaps, I will come back and see you again, when both of us know more about what we have to do."

"Don't you even want to see your daughter?"

"Daughter?" said Casher O'Neill. "Do I have a daughter?"

"Oh, poor fool, you. Didn't you even find that out after you left? She bore your child, all right. She even went through the old-fashioned business of a natural birth. The child even looks something like the way you used to look. Matter of fact, she's rather arrogant, like you. You can call on her if you want to. She lives in the house which is just outside the square in Golden Laut in the leather workers' area, and her husband's name is Ali Ali. Look her up if you want to."

She extended a hand. Casher took the hand as though she had

been a queen. And he kissed the cool fingers. As he looked her in the face, here too he brought his skills from *Henriada* in place. He surveyed and felt her personality as though he were a surgeon of the soul, but in this case there was nothing for him to do. This was not a dynamic personality struggling and fighting and moving against the forces of life and hope and disappointment. This was something else, a person set in life, immobile, determined, rigid even for a man with his own healing arts who could destroy a fleet with his thoughts or who could bring an idiot to normality by mere command. He could see that this was a case beyond his powers.

He patted the old hand friendly and she smiled warmly at him, not knowing what it meant. "If anyone asks," said Casher, "the name I have been using is that of the Doctor Bindaoud. Bindaoud the technician. Can you remember that, mother?"

"Bindaoud the technician," she echoed, as she let him out the door to walk in the street.

Within twenty minutes he was knocking at his daughter's door.

III

The daughter herself answered the door. She flung it open. She looked at the strange man, surveyed him from head to heels.

She noted the medical insignia on his uniform. She noted his mark of rank. She appraised him shrewdly, quickly, and she knew he had no business there in the quarters of the leather workers.

"Who are you?" she sang out, quickly and clearly.

"In these hours and at this time I pass under the name of the expert Bindaoud, a technician and medical man back from the special forces of Colonel Wedder. I'm just on leave, you see, but sometime later, madam, you might find out who I really am, and I thought you better hear it from my lips. I'm your father."

She did not move. The significant thing is that she did not move at all. Casher studied her and could see the cast of his own bones in the shape of her face, could see the length of his own fingers repeated in her hands. He had sensed that the storms of duty which had blown him from sorrow to sorrow, the wind of conscience which had kept alive his dreams of vengeance, had turned into something very different in her. It, too, was a force but not the kind of force he understood.

"I have children now and I would just as soon you not meet them. As a matter of fact, you have never done me a good deed except to beget me. You have never done me an ill deed except to threaten my life from beyond

the stars. I am tired of you and I am tired of everything you were or might have been. Let's forget it. Can't you go your way and let me be? I may be your daughter, but I can't help that."

"As you wish, madam. I have had many adventures and I do not propose to tell them to you. I can see quickly enough that you have what is seemingly a good life, and I hope that my deeds this morning in the palace will have made it better. You'll find out soon enough. Goodbye."

The door closed upon him and he walked back through the sun-drenched market of the leather workers. There were golden hides there. Hides of animals which had then been artfully engraved with very fine strips of beaten gold so that they gleamed in the sunlight. Casher looked upward and around.

"Where do I go now?" thought he. "Where do I go when I've done everything I had to do? When I've loved everyone I have wanted to love, when I have been everything I have had to be? What does a man with a mission do when the mission is fulfilled? Who can be more hollow than a victor? If I had lost, I could still want revenge. But I haven't. I've won. And I've won nothing. I've wanted nothing for myself from this dear city. I want nothing from this dear world. It's not in my power to give it or to take it.

Where do I go when I have nowhere to go? What do I become when I am not ready for death and I have no reason whatsoever for life?"

There sprang into his mind the memory of the world of Henriada with the twisting snakes of the little tornadoes. He could see the slender, pale, hushed face of the girl T'ruth, and he remembered at last that which it was which she had held in her hand. It was the magic. It was the secret sign of the old, strong religion. There was the man forever dying nailed to two pieces of wood. It was the mystery behind the civilization of all these stars. It was the thrill of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One, the Third Forbidden One. It was the mystery on which the robot, rat, and Copt agreed when they came back from space-three. He knew what he had to do.

He could not find himself because there was no himself to be found. He was a used tool. A discarded vessel. He was a shard tossed on the ruins of time, and yet he was a man with eyes and brains to think and with many unaccustomed powers.

He reached into the sky with his mind calling for a public flying machine. "Come and get me," he said, and the great winged birdlike machine came soaring over the rooftops and dropped

gently into the sunlit square.

"I thought I heard you call, sir."

Casher reached into his pocket and took out his imaginary pass signed by Wedder, authorizing him to use all the vehicles of the republic in the secret service of the regime of Colonel Wedder. The sergeant recognized the pass and almost popped out his eyes in respect.

"The Ninth Nile, can you reach it with this machine?"

"Easily," said the sergeant. "But you better get some shoes first. Iron shoes because the ground there is mostly volcanic glass."

"Wait here," said Casher. "Where can I get the shoes?"

"Two streets over and better get two water bottles, too."

IV

Within a matter of minutes he was back. The sergeant watched him fill the bottles in the fountain. He looked at his medical insignia without doubt and showed him how to sit on the cramped emergency seat inside the great machine bird. They snapped their seat belts and the sergeant said, "Ready?" and the ornithopter spread out its wings, and the machine-bird pushed its powerful legs, launched itself into the air.

The huge wings were like oars

digging into a big sea. They rose rapidly and soon Kaheer was below them, the fragile minarettes and the white sand with the racing turf along the river, and the green fields, and even with pyramids copied from something on Ancient Earth.

The operator did something, and the machine flew harder. The wings, although far slower than any jet aircraft, were steady, and they moved with respectable speed across the broad dry desert. Casher still wore his decimal watch from Henriada, and it was two whole decimal hours before the sergeant turned around, pinched him gently awake from the drowse into which he had fallen, shouted something and pointed down. A strip of silver matched by two strips of green wandering through a wilderness of black, gleaming glittering black, with the beige sands of the everlasting desert stretching everywhere in the distance.

"The Ninth Nile?" shouted Casher. The sergeant smiled the smile of a man who had heard nothing but wanted to be agreeable, and the ornithopter dived with a lurching suddenness toward the twist in the river. A few buildings became visible. They were modest and small. Verandas, perhaps, for the use of a visitor. Nothing more.

It was not the sergeant's business to query anyone on secret

orders from Colonel Wedder. He showed the cramped Casher O'Neill how to get out of the ornithopter, and then, standing in his seat, saluted, and said, "Anything else, sir?"

Casher said, "No. I'll make my own way. If they ask you who I was, I am the Doctor Bindaoud, and you have left me here under orders."

"Right, sir," said the sergeant, and the great machine reached out its gleaming wings, flapped, spiraled, climbed, became a dot, and vanished.

Casher stood there alone. Utterly alone. For many years he had been supported by a sense of purpose, by a drive to do something. Now the drives and the purpose were gone, and his life was gone. The use of his future was gone, and he had nothing. All he had was the ultimate of power, access to any woman he might wish, wealth beyond the normal imagination, health, and great skills. These were not what he wanted. He wanted the liberation of all Mizzer. But he had gotten that, so what was it? He almost stumbled towards one of the nearby buildings.

A voice spoke up. A woman's voice. The friendly voice of an old woman.

Very unexpectedly, she said, "I've been waiting for you, Casher, come on in."

V

He stared at her. "I've seen you," he said. "I've seen you somewhere. I know you well. You've affected my fate. You did something to me and yet I don't know who you are. How could you be here to meet me when I didn't know I was coming?"

"Everything in its time," said the woman. "With a time for everything and what you need now is rest. I'm D'alma, the dog-woman from Pontoppidan. The one who washed the dishes."

"Her," cried he.

"Me," she said.

"But you—but you—how did you get here?"

"I got here," she said. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Who sent you?"

"You're part of the way to the truth," she said. "You might as well hear a little more of it. I was sent here by a lord whose name I will never mention. A lord of the underpeople. Acting from earth. He sent out another dog-woman to take my place. And he had me shipped here as simple baggage. I worked in the hospital where you recovered, and I read your mind as you got well. I knew what you would do to Wedder, and I was pretty sure that you would come up here to the Ninth Nile, because that is the road that all searchers must take."

"Do you mean," he said, "that you know the road to—" He hesitated and then plunged into his question, "the Holy of Unholies, the Thirteenth Nile?"

"I don't see that it means anything, Casher. Except that you'd better take off those iron shoes; you don't need them yet. You'd better come in here. Come on in."

He pushed the beaded curtains aside and entered the bungalow. It was a simple frontier official dwelling. There were cots hither and yon, a room to the rear which obviously seemed to be hers, a dining room to the right and papers, a viewing machine, cards and games on the table. The room itself was astonishingly cool.

She said, "Casher, you've got to relax. And that is the hardest of all things to do. To relax, when you had a mission for many many years."

"I know it," said he. "I know it. But knowing it and doing it aren't the same things."

"Now you can do it," said D'Alma.

"Do what?" he snapped.

"Relax, as we were talking about. All you have to do here is to have some good meals. Just sleep a few times; swim in the river if you want to. I have sent everyone away except myself, and you and I shall have this house. And I am an old woman, not even a human being. You're a man, a true man, who's con-

quered a thousand worlds. And who has finally triumphed over Wedder. I think we'll get along. And when you're ready for the trip, I'll take you."

The days did pass as she said they would. With insistent but firm kindness she made him play games with her. Simple, childish games with dice and cards. Once or twice he tried to hypnotize her. To throw the dice his own way. He changed the cards in her hand. He found that she had very little telepathic offensive power, but that her defenses were superb. She smiled at him whenever she caught him playing tricks. And his tricks failed.

With this kind of atmosphere he really began to relax. She was the woman who had spelled happiness for him on Pontoppidan when he didn't know what happiness was. When he had abandoned the lovely Genevieve to go on with his quest for vengeance.

Once he said to her, "Is that old horse still alive?"

"Of course he is," she said. "That horse will probably outlive you and me. He thinks he's on Mizzer by galloping around a patrol capsule. Come on back; it's your turn to play."

He put down the cards and slowly the peace, the simplicity, the reassuring, silly, calm sweetness of it all stole over him, and he began to perceive the nature of her therapy. It was to do noth-

ing but slow him down. He was to meet himself again.

It may have been the tenth day, perhaps it was the fourteenth, that he said to her, "When do we go?"

She said, "I've been waiting for that question and we're ready now. We go."

"When?"

"Right now. Put on your shoes. You won't need them very much," she said, "But you might need them where we land. I am taking you there part way."

Within a few minutes, they went out into the yard. The river in which he had swum lay below. A shed which he did not remember having noticed before lay at the far end of the yard. She did something to the door, removing a lock, and the door flung open. And she pulled out a skeletonized ornithopter motor, wings, tails. The body was just a bracket of metal. The source of power was as usual an ultraminiaturized, nuclear-powered battery. Instead of seats, there were two tiny saddles, like the saddles used on the bicycles of old, old Earth which he had seen in museums.

"You can fly that?" he said.

"Of course I can fly it. It's better than going 200 miles over broken glass. We are leaving civilization now. We are leaving civilization, Casher. We are leaving everything that was on any map. We are flying directly to the

Thirteenth Nile, as you well knew it should be that."

"I knew that," he said. "I never expected to reach it so soon. Does this have anything to do with that Sign of the Fish you were talking about?"

"Everything, Casher. Everything. But everything in its place. Climb in behind me." He sat on top of the ornithopter, and this one ran down the yard on its tall, graceful mechanical legs before the flaps of its wings put it in the air. She was a better pilot than the sergeant had been; she soared more and beat the wings less. She flew over country that he, a native of Mizzer, had never dreamed about.

They came to a city gaudy in color. He could see large fires burning alongside the river, and bright painted people with their hands lifted in prayer. He saw temples and strange gods in them. He saw markets with goods, which he never thought to see marketed.

She put the ornithopter down; and as they climbed out of the saddles, it lifted itself into the air and flew back, in the direction from whence they had come. "You are staying with me?" said Casher.

"Of course I am. I was sent to be with you."

"What for?"

"You are important to the worlds, Casher, to all the worlds.

Not just Mizzer. In the authority of the friends I have, they have sent me here to help you."

"But what do you get out of it?"

"I get nothing, Casher. I find my own destruction, perhaps, but I will accept that. Even the loss of my own hope if it only moves you further on on your voyage."

"What is this?" he said.

"This? Haven't you heard of it? This is the City of Hopeless Hope. Let's go through."

VI

They walked through the strange streets. Almost everyone in the streets seemed to be engaged in the practice of religion. The stench of the burning dead was all around them. Talismans, luck charms, and funeral supplies were in universal abundance.

Casher said, speaking rather quietly to D'alma, "I never knew there was anything like this on any civilized planet."

"Obviously," she replied, "there must be many people who believe in worry about death; there are many who do know about this place. Otherwise there would not be the throngs here. These are the people who have the wrong hope and who go to no place at all, who find under this earth and under the stars their final fulfillment. These are the

ones who are so sure that they are right that they never will be right. We must pass through them quickly, Casher, lest we, too, start believing."

No one impeded their passage in the streets, although many people paused to see that a soldier, even a medical soldier, in uniform, had the audacity to come there.

They were even more surprised that an old hospital attendant, who seemed to be an off-world dog, walked along beside him.

"We cross the bridge now, Casher, and this bridge is the most terrible thing I've ever seen; whereas now we are going to come to Jwindz, and the Jwindz oppose you and me and everything you stand for."

"Who are the Jwindz?" said Casher.

"The Jwindz are the perfect ones. They are perfect in this earth. You will see soon enough."

VII

As they crossed the bridge a tall, blithe, police official clad in a neat black uniform stepped up to them and said, "Go back. People from your city are not welcome here."

"We are not from that city," said D'alma. "We are travellers."

"Where are you bound?" said the police official.

"We are bound for the source

of the Thirteenth Nile."

"Nobody goes there," said the guard.

"We are going there," said D'alma.

"By what authority?"

Casher reached into his pocket and took out a genuine card. He had remade one, from the memories he had retained in his mind. It was an all-world pass, authorized by the Instrumentality.

The police official looked at it and his eyes widened.

"Sir and master, I thought you were merely one of Wedder's men. You must be someone of great importance. I will notify the scholars in the Hall of Learning at the middle of the city. They will want to see you. Wait here. A vehicle will come."

D'alma and Casher O'Neill did not have long to wait. She said nothing at all in this time. Her air of good humor and competence ebbed perceptibly. She was distressed by the cleanliness and perfection around her, by the silence, by the dignity of the people.

When the vehicle came, it had a driver, as correct, as smooth, and as courteous as the guard at the bridge. He opened the door and waved them in. They climbed in and they sped noiselessly through well-groomed streets. Houses, each one in immaculate taste. Trees planted the way the trees should be planted.

In the square in the center of the city they stopped. The driver got out, walked around the vehicle, opened their door.

He pointed at the archway of the large building, and he said, "They are expecting you."

Casher and D'alma walked up the steps reluctantly. She was reluctant because she had some sense of what this place was, a special dwelling for quiet doom and arrogant finality. He was reluctant because he could feel that in every bone of her body she resented this place. And he resented it, too.

They were led through the archway and across a patio to a large, elegant conference room.

Within the room a circular table had already been set in preparation for a meal.

Ten handsome men rose to greet them.

The first one said, "You are Casher O'Neill. You are the wanderer. You are the man dedicated to this planet, and we appreciate what you have done for us, even though the power of Colonel Wedder never reached here."

"Thank you," said Casher. "I am surprised to hear that you know of me."

"That's nothing," said the man. "We know of everyone. And you, woman," said the same man to D'alma, "you know full well that we never entertain women here. And you are the only un-

derperson in this city. A dog at that. But in honor of our guest we shall let you pass. Sit down if you wish. We want to talk to you."

A meal was served. Little squares of sweet unknown meat, fresh fruits, bits of melon, chased with harmonious drinks which cleared the mind and stimulated it, without intoxicating or drugging.

The language of their conversations was clear and elevated.

All questions were answered swiftly, smoothly, and with positive clarity.

Finally, Casher was moved to ask, "I do not seem to have heard of you, Jwindz, who are you?"

"We are the perfect ones," said the oldest Jwindz, "We have all the answers; there is nothing else left to find."

How do you get here?" said Casher.

"We are selected from many worlds."

"Where are your families?"

"We don't bring them with us."

"How do you keep out intruders?"

"If they are good, they wish to stay. If they are not good, we destroy them."

Casher, still shocked by his experience of fulfilling all his life's work in the confrontation with Wedder back in the palace of Kaheer, said lightly and, even though his life might be at stake,

asked casually, "Have you decided yet whether I am perfect or not to join you? Or am I not perfect and to be destroyed?"

The heaviest of all the Jwindz, a tall, portly man, with a great bushy shock of black hair replied ponderously, "Sir, you are forcing our decision, but I think that you may be something exceptional. We cannot accept you. There is too much force in you. You may be perfect, but you are more than perfect. We are men and, sir, I do not think that you are any longer a mere man. You are almost a machine. You are yourself dead people. You are the magic of ancient battles coming to strike among us. We are all of us a little afraid of you, and yet we do not know what to do with you. If you were to stay here a while, if you calmed down, we might give you hope. We know perfectly well what that dog-woman of yours calls our city. She calls it the suburb of Hopeless Hope. We just call it Jwindz Jo, in memory of the ancient Rule of the Jwindz, which somewhere once obtained upon old Earth. And therefore we think that we will neither kill you nor accept you. We think—do we not, gentlemen?—that we will speed you on your way, as we have sped no other traveller. And that we will send you, then, to a place which few people pass. But you have the strength and if you are

going to the source of the Thirteenth Nile, you will need it."

"I will need strength?" said Casher.

The first Jwindz who had met them at the door said, "Indeed you will need strength, if you go to Mortoval. We may be dangerous to the uninitiated. Mortoval is worse than dangerous. It is a trap many times worse than death. But go there if you must."

VIII

Casher O'Neill and D'alma reached Mortoval on a one-wheeled cart, which ran on a high wire past picturesque mountain gorges, soaring over two serrated series of peaks and finally dropping down to another bend in the same river, the illegal and forgotten Thirteenth Nile.

When the vehicle stopped, they got out. No one had accompanied them. The vehicle, held in place by gyroscopes and compasses, felt itself relieved of their weight and hurried home.

This time there was no city: just one great arch. D'alma clung close to him. She even took his arm and pulled it over her shoulder as though she needed protection. She whined a little as they walked up a low hill and finally reached the arch.

They walked into the arch and a voice not made of sound cried out to them, "I am youth and am

everything that you have been or ever will be. Know this now before I show you more."

Casher was brave, and this time he was cheerfully hopeless, so he said, "I know who I am. Who are you?"

"I am the force of the Gunung Banga. I am the power of this planet which keeps everyone in this planet and which assures the order which persists among the stars, and promises that the dead shall not walk among the men. And I serve of the fate and the hope of the future. Pass if you think you can."

Casher searched with his own mind and he found what he wanted. He found the memory of an eleven-year-old child, Truth, who had been almost a thousand years on the planet of Henriada. A child soft and gentle on the outside, but wise and formidable and terrible beyond belief, in the powers which she had carried, which had been imprinted upon her.

As he walked through the arch, he cast the images of truth here and there. Therefore he was not one person but a multitude. And the machine and the living being, which hid behind the machine, the Gunung Banga, obviously could see him and could see D'alma walking through, but the machine was not prepared to recognize old multitudes of crying throngs.

"Who are you thousands that you should come here now? Who are you multitudes that you should be two people? I sense all of you. The fighters and the ships and the men of blood, the searchers and the forgetters. There's even an Old North Australian renunciant here. And the great go-captain Tree, and there are even a couple of men of old Earth. You are all walking through me. How can I cope with you?"

"Make us us," said Casher firmly.

"Make you you," replied the machine. "Make you you. How can I make you you when I do not know who you are, when you flit like ghosts and you confuse my computers? There are too many, I say. There are too many of you. It is ordained that you should pass."

"If it is so ordained, then let us pass." D'alma suddenly stood proud and erect.

They walked on through.

She said, "You got us through." They had indeed passed beyond the arch, and there, beyond the arch, lay a gentle riverside with skiffs pulled up along the beach, the oars shipped aboard.

"This seems to be next," said Casher O'Neill.

D'alma nodded,

"I'm your dog, master. We go where you think."



They climbed into a skiff. Echoes of tumult followed from the arch.

"Goodbye to troubles," the echoes said, "Had they been people they would have been stopped. But she was a dog and a servant, who had lived many years in the happiness of the Sign of the Fish. And he was a combat-ready man who had incorporated within himself the memories of adversaries and friends, too tumultuous for any scanner to measure, too complex for any computer to assess." The echoes resounded across the river.

There was even a dock on the other side. Casher tied the skiff

to the dock, and he helped the dog-woman go toward the buildings that they saw beyond some trees.

XI

D'alma said, "I have seen pictures of this place. This is the Kermesse Dorgueil, and here we may lose our way because this is the place where all the happy things of this world come together, but where the man and the two pieces of wood never filter through. We shall see no one unhappy, no one sick, no one unbalanced; everyone will be enjoying the good things of life. Perhaps I will enjoy it too. May the Sign of the Fish help me that I not become perfect too soon."

"You won't be," Casher promised.

At the gate of this city, there was no guard at all. They walked on past a few people who seemed to be promenading outside the town. Within the city they approached what seemed to be a hotel and an inn or a hospital. At any rate it was a place where many people were fed.

A man came out and said, "Well, this is a strange sight. I never knew that the Colonel Wedder let his officers get this far from home, and as for you, woman, you're not even a human being. You're an odd couple and you're not in love with each oth-

er. Can we do anything for you?"

Casher reached into his pocket and tossed several credit pieces of five denominations in front of the man.

"Don't these mean anything?" said Casher.

Catching them in his fingers the man said, "Oh, we can use money! We use it occasionally for important things; we don't need yours. We live well here, and we have a nice life, not like those two places across the river that stay away from life. All men who are perfect are nothing but talk—Jwindz they call themselves, the perfect ones—well, we're not that perfect. We've got families and good food and good clothes, and we get the latest news from all the worlds."

"News," said Casher, "I thought that was illegal."

"We get anything. You would be surprised at what we have here. It's a very civilized place. Come on in. This is the hotel of the Singing Swans, and you can live here as long as you wish. When I say that, I mean it. Our treasure has unusual resources, and I can see that you are unusual people. You are not a medical technician, despite that uniform; and if you and your follower were nothing but a mere dog underperson, you wouldn't have gotten this far."

They entered a promenade two stories high; little shops lined

each side of the corridor with the treasures of all the worlds on exhibit. The prices were marked explaining them but there was no one in the stalls.

The smell of good food came from a cool dining room in the inn.

"Come into my office and have a drink. My name is Howard."

"That's an old Earth name," said Casher.

"Why shouldn't it be?" said Howard. "I came here from old Earth. I looked for the best of all places, and it took me a long time to look, and this is it. The Kermesse Dorgueil. We have nothing here but simple and clean pleasures, we have only those vices which help and support, we accomplish the possible, we reject the impossible, we live life, not death. Our talk is about things and not about ideas. We have nothing but scorn for that city behind you, the City of the Perfect Ones, and we have nothing but pity for the holier than holies far back where they claim to have Hopeless Hope, and practice nothing but evil religion. I passed through those places too, although I had to go around the City of the Perfect Ones. I know what they are and I've come all the way from Earth, and if I have come all the way from old old Earth, I should know what this is. You should take my word for it."

"I've been on Earth myself," said Casher, rather drily. "It's not that unusual."

The man stopped with surprise: "You've been on Earth? Who are you?"

"My name," said Casher, "is Casher O'Neill."

The man halted and then gave him a deep bow.

"If you are the Casher O'Neill, you have changed this world. You have come back, my lord and master. Welcome. We are no longer your host. This is your city. What do you wish of us?"

"To look a while, to rest a while, to ask directions for the voyage."

"Directions? Why should anyone want directions away from here? People come here and ask directions from a thousand places to get to Kermesse Dorgueil."

"Let's not argue this now," said Casher. "Show us the rooms, let us clean ourselves up. Two separate rooms."

Howard walked up stairs. With an intricate twist of his hand he unlocked two rooms.

"At your service," he said. "Call me with your voice; I can hear you anywhere in the building."

Casher called once for sleeping gear, toothbrushes, shaving equipment. He insisted that they send the shampooer, a woman of apparent Earth origin, in to at-

tend to D'alma; and D'alma actually knocked at his door and begged that he not shower her with these attentions.

He said, "You with your deep kindness have helped me so far. I am helping you a very little."

They ate a light repast together in the garden just below their two rooms, and then they went to their rooms and slept.

And it was only on the morning of the second day that they went with Howard into the city to see what could be found.

Everywhere the city was strong with happiness. The population could not have been very large, twenty or thirty thousand persons at most.

At one point Casher stopped; he could smell the scorch of ozone in the air. He knew the atmosphere itself had been burned, and that meant only one thing, spaceships coming in or going out.

He said, "Where is the spaceport for Earth?"

Howard looked at him quickly and keenly. "If you were not the lord Casher O'Neill, I'd never tell you. We have a small spaceport there. That is the way that we avoid our traffic with most of Mizzer. Do you need it sir?"

"Not now," said Casher, "I just wondered where it was." They came to a woman who danced as she sang to the accompaniment of two men with wild archaic guitars. Her feet did

not have the laughter of ordinary dance, but they had the positiveness, the compulsion of a meaning. Howard looked at her appreciatively; he even ran the tip of his tongue across his upper lip.

"She is not yet spoken for," said Howard. "And yet she is a very unusual thing. A resigned ex-lady of the Instrumentality."

"I find that unusual indeed. What is her name?"

"Celalta," said Howard. "Celalta, the other one. She has been in many worlds, perhaps as many worlds as you have, sir. She's faced dangers. She's faced dangers like the ones you've faced. And oh, my lord and master, forgive me for saying it, but when I look at her dancing, and I see you looking at her, I can see a little bit into the future; and I can see you both dead together, the winds slowly blowing the flesh off your bones. And your bones anonymous and white, lying two valleys over from this very place."

"That's an odd enough prophecy," said Casher. "Especially from someone who seems not to be poetic. What is that?"

"I seem to see you in the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene. There's a road out of here that goes there, and some people, not many, go there, and when they go there they die. I don't know why," said Howard; "don't ask me."

D'alma whispered, "That is the road to the Shrine of Shrines. That's the place to the Quel itself. Find out where it starts."

"Where does that road start?" said Casher.

"Oh, you'll find out; there's nothing you won't find out. Sorry, my lord and master. The road starts just beyond that bright orange roof." He pointed to a roof and then turned back.

Without saying anything more, he clapped his hands at the dancer, and she gave him a scornful look. Howard clapped his hands again; she stopped dancing and walked over.

"And what is it you want now, Howard?"

He gave her a deep bow. "My former lady, my mistress, here is the lord and master of this planet, Casher O'Neill."

"I am not really the lord and master," said Casher O'Neill. "I merely would have been if Wedder had not taken the rule away from my uncle."

"Should I care about that?" said the woman.

Casher smiled back. "I don't see why you should."

"Do you have anything you want to say to me?"

"Yes," said Casher. He reached over and seized her wrist. Her wrist was almost as strong as his. "You have danced your last dance, madame, at least for the time. You and I are going to a

place that this man knows about, and he says that we are going to die there, and our bones will be blown with the wind."

"You give me commands," she cried.

"I give you commands," he said.

"What is your authority?" she asked scornfully.

"Me," he said.

She looked at him; he looked back at her still holding her wrist.

She said, "I have powers. Don't make me use them."

He said, "I have powers, too; nobody can make me use mine."

"I'm not afraid of you; go ahead."

Fire shot at him as he felt the lunge of her mind toward his, her attack, her flight for freedom; but he kept her wrist, and she said nothing.

But with his mind responding to hers he unfolded the many worlds, the old Earth itself, the gem Planet, Olympia of the blind brokers, the storm planet Henriada, and a thousand other places that most people only knew in stories and dreams. And then just for a little bit he showed her who he was, a native of Mizzer who had become a citizen of the Universe. A fighter who had been transformed into a doer. He let her know that in his own mind he carried the powers of T'ruth, the turtle-girl, and be-

hind the Truth herself he carried the personalities of the Hechizera of Gonfalon. He let her see the ships in the sky turning and twisting as they fought nothing at all, because his mind, or another mind which had become his, had commanded them to.

Then with the shock of sudden vision, he projected to her the two pieces of wood, the image of a man in pain, and he shouted to her. Gently, with the simple rhetoric of profound faith, he pronounced, "This is the call of the First Forbidden One and the Second Forbidden One and the Third Forbidden One. This is the symbol of the Sign of the Fish. For this you are going to leave this town, and you are going with me, and it may be that you and I shall become lovers."

Behind him a voice spoke. "And I," said D'alma, "will stay here."

He turned around to her, "D'alma, you've come this far; you've got to come further."

"I can't, my lord; I read my duty as I see it. If the authorities who sent me want me enough, they will send me back to my dishwasher on Pontoppidan; otherwise they will leave me here. I am temporarily beautiful and I'm rich and I'm happy and I don't know what to do with myself, but I know that I have seen you as far as I can. May the

Sign of the Fish be with you."

Howard merely stood aside, making no attempt to hinder them or to help them.

Celalta walked beside Casher like a wild animal which had never been captured before.

Casher O'Neill never let go of her wrist.

"Do we need food for this trip?" he said to Howard.

"No one knows what you need."

"Should we take food?"

"I don't see why," said Howard "you have water. You can always walk back here if you have disappointments. It's really not very far."

"Will you rescue me?"

"If you insist on it," said Howard. "I suppose somewhere people will come out and bring you back, but I don't think you will insist—because that is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene, and the people who go in there do not want to come out, and do not want to eat, and they do not want to go forward. We have never seen anyone vanish to the other side, but you might make it."

"I am looking," said Casher, "for something. I am looking for something which is more than power between the worlds. I am looking for a sphinx that is bigger than the sphinx on old Earth. For weapons which cut sharper than lasers, for forces

that move faster than bullets. I am looking for something which will take the power away from me and put the simple humanity back into me. I am looking for something which will be nothing, but a nothing I can serve and can believe in."

"You sound like the right kind of man," said Howard, "for that kind of trip. Go with you in peace, both of you."

Celalta said, "I do not really know who you are, my lord, master, but I have danced my last dance. I see what you mean. This is the road that leads away from happiness. This is the path which leaves good clothes and warm shops behind. There are no restaurants where we are going, no hotels, no river anymore. There are neither believers nor unbelievers, but there is something that comes out of the soil and which makes people die. But if you think, Casher O'Neill, that you can triumph over it, I will go with you. And if you do not think it, I will die with you."

"We are going, Celalta. I didn't know that it was just going to be the two of us, but we are going and we are going now."

X

It was actually less than two kilometers to get over the ridge away from the trees, away from the moisture-laden air along the

river and into a dry, calm valley which had a clean, blessed quietness which Casher had never seen before.

Celalta was almost gay. "This, this, is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene?"

"I suppose it is," said Casher, "but I propose to keep on walking. It isn't very big."

They walked.

As they walked their bodies became burdensome; they carried not only their own weight but the weight of every month of their lives. The decision seemed good to them that they should lie down in the valley and rest amid the skeletons, rest as the others had rested. Celalta became disoriented. She stumbled, and her eyes became unfocused.

Not for nothing had Casher O'Neill learned all the arts of battle of a thousand worlds. Not for nothing had he come through space-three. This valley might have been tempting if already he had not ridden the cosmos on his eyes alone.

He had. He knew the way out. It was merely through. Celalta seemed to come more to life as they reached the top of the ridge. The whole world was suddenly transformed by not less than ten steps. Far behind them, several kilometers, perhaps, there were still visible the last rooftops of the Kermesse Dorgueil. Behind them lay the bleaching skeletons;

in front—

In front of them was the final source and the mystery, the Quel of the Thirteenth Nile.

XI

There was no sign of a house, but there were fruits and melons and grain growing, and there were deep trees at the edges of caves, and there were here and there signs of people that had been there long ago. There were no signs of present occupancy.

"My lord," said the once-lady Celalta, "my lord," she repeated, "I think this is it."

"But this is nothing," said Casher.

"Exactly. Nothing is victory, nothing is arrival, nowhere is getting there. Don't you see now why she left us?"

"She?" said Casher.

"Yes, your faithful companion, the dog-woman D'alma."

"No, I don't see it. Why did she leave this to us?"

Celalta laughed. "We're Adam and Eve in a way. It's not up to us to be given a god or to be given a faith. It's up to us to find the power, and this is the quietest and last of the searching places. The others were just phantoms, hazards on our route. The best way to find freedom is not to look for it, just as you obtained your utter revenge on Wedder by doing him a little bit

of good. Can't you see it, Casher? You have won at last the victory so immense that it makes all battles seem vain. There is food around us; we can even walk back to the Kermesse Dorgueil if we want clothing or company or if we want to hear the news, but most of all this is the place in which I feel the presence of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One and the Third Forbidden One. We don't need a church for this; I suppose there are still churches on some planets. What we need is a place to find ourselves and be ourselves and I'm not sure that this chance exists in many other cases than this one spot."

"You mean," said Casher, "that everywhere is nowhere?"

"Not quite that," said Celalta. "We have some work to do getting this place in shape, feeding ourselves. Do you know how to cook? Well, I can cook better. We can catch a few things to eat, we can shut ourselves in that cave and then," and then Celalta smiled, her face more beautiful than he ever expected he would find a face to be, "we have each other."

Casher stood battle ready, facing the most beautiful dancer he had ever met. He realized that she had once been a part of the Instrumentality, a governor of worlds, a genuine advisor in the destination of mankind. He did

not know what strange motives had caused her to quit authority and to come up to this hard-to-find river, unmarked on maps. He didn't even know why the man Howard should have paired them so quickly: perhaps there was another force. A force behind that dog-woman which had sent him to his final destination.

He looked down at Celalta and then he looked up at the sky and he said, "Day is ending; I will catch a few of those birds if you know how to cook them. We seem to be a sort of Adam and a sort of Eve, and I do not know whether this is paradise or hell, but I know that you are in it with me and that I can think about you because you ask nothing of me."

"That is true, my lord; I ask nothing of you. I too am looking for both of us, not myself alone. I can make a sacrifice for you, but I look for those things which we two, only we two, acting together can find in this valley."

He nodded.

"Look," she said, "that is the Quel itself, there the Thirteenth Nile comes out of the rocks, and here are the woods below. I seem to have heard of it. Well, we'll have plenty of time. I'll start the fire, but you go catch two of those chickens. I don't even think they're wild birds. I think they are just left over people-chickens that have grown wild since their previous owners left. . . ."

"Or died," said Casher.

"Or died," repeated Celalta. "Isn't that a risk anybody has to take? Let us live my lord, you and I, and let us find the magic, the deliverance which strange fates have thrown in front of you and me. You have liberated Mizzer; is that not enough? Simply by touching Wedder, you have done what otherwise could have been accomplished at the price of battle and great suffering."

"Thank you," said Casher.

"I was once Instrumentality, my lord, and I know that the Instrumentality likes to do things suddenly and victoriously. When I was there, we never accepted defeat, but we never paid anything extra. The shortest route between two points might look like the long way around; it isn't. It's merely the cheapest human way of getting there. Has it ever occurred to you that the Instrumentality might be rewarding you for what you have done for this planet?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Casher.

"You hadn't thought of it?" she smiled.

"Well," said Casher, embarrassed and at a loss of words.

"I am a very special kind of woman," said Celalta. "You will be finding that out in the next few weeks. Why else do you think that I would be given to you?"

He did not go to hunt the

chickens, not just then; he reached his arms out to her and with more trust and less fear than he had felt in many years he held her in his arms, and kissed her on the lips. This time there was no secret reserve in his

mind, no promise that after this he would get on with his journey to Mizzer. He had won, his victory was behind him, and in front of him there lay nothing, but this beautiful and powerful place and . . . Celalta.

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RESTRICTED AREA

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NICE looking place, isn't it, Captain?" Simmons asked with elaborate casualness, looking through the port. "Rather a paradise." He yawned.

"You can't go out yet," Captain Kilpepper said, noting the biologist's immediate disappointed expression.

"But Captain—"

"No." Kilpepper looked out the port at the rolling meadow of grass. Sprinkled with red flowers, it appeared as luscious as it had two days ago when they had landed. To the right of the meadow was a brown forest shot through with yellow and orange blossoms. To the left was a row of hills, colored in contrasting shades of blue-green. A waterfall tumbled down one of the hills.

Trees, flowers, all that sort of thing. The place was undeniably pretty, and it was for that very reason that Kilpepper distrusted it. Experience with two wives and five new ships had taught him that a lovely exterior can conceal almost anything. And fifteen years in space had added lines to his forehead and gray to his hair, but hadn't given him any reason for altering his conviction.

"Here are the reports, sir," Mate Manella said, handing him a sheaf of papers. Manella had a petulant expression on his broad, rugged face. Behind the door, Kilpepper could hear shuf-

fling feet and whispering voices. He knew it was the crew, assembled to hear what he would say this time.

They wanted outside, but bad.

Kilpepper skimmed the reports. They were the same as the last four groups. Atmosphere breathable and free of dangerous microorganisms, bacteria count nil, radargraph all clear. Some form of animal life in the nearby forest, but no energy manifestations. Detection of a large metallic mass, possibly an iron-rich mountain, several miles south. Noted for further investigation.

"That's fine," Kilpepper said unhappily. The reports vaguely annoyed him. He knew from past experience that there was usually something wrong with every planet. It paid to find it at the start, before costly accidents resulted.

"Can we go out, sir?" Manella asked, his short body stiffly erect. Kilpepper could almost feel the crewmen behind the door holding their breath.

"I don't know," Kilpepper said. He scratched his head, trying to think of some good reason for refusing again. There *must* be something wrong.

"All right," he said at last. "Post a full guard for the time being. Let four men out. No one goes beyond twenty-five feet of the ship." He had to let them go.

After sixteen months in the hot, cramped spaceship, he'd have a mutiny on his hands if he didn't.

"Yes sir!" Mate Manella said, and dashed out the door.

"I suppose that means the scientific team can go out," Simmons said, his hands jammed in his pockets.

"Sure," Kilpepper said warily. "I'll go with you. After all, this expedition is expendable."

The air of the unnamed planet was fragrant after the musty, recirculated air of the ship. The breeze from the mountains was light and steady and refreshing.

Captain Kilpepper sniffed appreciatively, arms folded across his chest. The four crewmen were walking around, stretching their legs and breathing in great lungfuls of fresh air. The scientific team was standing together, wondering where to begin. Simmons bent down and plucked a spear of grass.

"Funny looking stuff," he said, holding it up to the sunlight.

"Why?" Captain Kilpepper asked, walking over.

"Look at it." The thin biologist held it higher. "Perfectly smooth. Doesn't show any sign of cell formation. Let me see—" He bent over a red blossom.

"Hey! We got visitors!" A crewman named Flynn was the

first to spot the natives. They came out of the forest and trotted across the meadow to the ship.

Captain Kilpepper glanced at the ship. The gunners were ready and alert. He touched his sidearm for reassurance, and waited.

"Oh, brother," Aramic murmured. As the ship's linguist, he eyed the advancing natives with intense professional interest. The rest of the men just stared.

In the lead was a creature with a neck at least eight feet long, like a giraffe, and thick, stubby legs, like an hippopotamus. It had a cheerful expression on its face. Its hide was purple, sprinkled with large white dots.

Next in line came five little beasts with pure white fur. They were about the size of terriers, and they had an owlishly solemn expression. A fat, red little creature with a green tail at least sixteen feet long brought up the rear.

They stopped in front of the men and bowed. There was a long moment of silence, then everyone burst into laughter.

The laughter seemed to be a signal. The five little ones leaped to the back of the hippo-giraffe. They scrambled for a moment, then climbed on each other's shoulders. In a moment they were balanced, five high, like a team of acrobats.

The men applauded wildly.

The fat animal immediately started balancing on his tail.

"Bravo!" shouted Simmons.

The five furry animals jumped off the giraffe's back and started to dance around the pig.

"Hurray!" Morrison, the bacteriologist, called.

The hippo-giraffe turned a clumsy somersault, landed on one ear, scrambled to his feet and bowed deeply.

Captain Kilpepper frowned and rubbed one hand against another. He was trying to figure out some reason for this behavior.

The natives burst into song. The melody was strange, but recognizable as a tune. They harmonized for a few seconds, then bowed and began to roll on the grass.

The crewmen were still applauding. Aramic had taken out his notebook and was jotting down the sounds.

"All right," Kilpepper said. "Crew, back inside."

They gave him reproachful looks.

"Let some of the other men have a chance," the captain said. Regretfully, the men filed back inside.

"I suppose you want to examine them some more," Kilpepper said to the scientists.

"Sure do," Simmons stated. "Never saw anything like it."

Kilpepper nodded and went back into the ship. Four more crewmen filed past him.

"Morena!" Kilpepper shouted. The mate came bounding into the bridge. "I want you to find that metal mass. Take a man and keep in radio contact with the ship at all times."

"Yes sir," Morena said, grinning broadly. "Friendly, aren't they, sir?"

"Yes," Kilpepper said.

"Nice little world," the mate said.

"Yes."

Mate Morena went off to collect his equipment.

Captain Kilpepper sat down and tried to figure out what was wrong with the planet.

Kilpepper spent most of the next day filling out progress reports. In the late afternoon he put down his pencil and went out for a walk.

"Have you got a moment, Captain?" Simmons asked. "There's something I'd like to show you in the forest." Kilpepper grumbled out of habit, but followed the biologist. He had been curious about the forest himself.

On the way, they were accompanied by three natives. These particular three looked like dogs, except for their coloring—red and white, like peppermint candy.

"Now then," Simmons said

with ill-concealed eagerness, once they were in the forest. "Look around. What do you see that strikes you as odd?"

Kilpepper looked. The trees were thick-trunked and spaced wide apart. So wide apart, in fact, that it was possible to see the next clearing through them.

"Well," he said, "you couldn't get lost here."

"It's not that," Simmons said. "Come on, look again."

Kilpepper smiled. Simmons had brought him here because he made a better audience than any of his preoccupied colleagues.

Behind them, the three natives leaped and played.

"There's no underbrush," Kilpepper stated, after walking a few yards further. There were vines twisting up the sides of the trees, covered with multi-colored flowers. Glancing around, Kilpepper saw a bird dart down, flutter around the head of one of the peppermint-colored dogs, and fly away again.

The bird was colored gold and silver.

"Don't you see anything wrong yet?" Simmons asked impatiently.

"Only the color scheme," Kilpepper said. "Is there something else?"

"Look at the trees."

The boughs were laden with fruit. It hung in clumps, all on the lower branches, of a bewil-

dering variety of colors, sizes and shapes. There were things that looked like grapes, and things that looked like bananas, and things that looked like watermelons, and—

"Lots of different species, I guess," Kilpepper hazarded, not sure what it was Simmons wanted him to see.

"Different species! Look, man. There are as many as ten different kinds of fruit growing on one branch!"

Examining closer, Kilpepper saw it was true. Each tree had an amazing multiplicity of fruit.

"And that's just impossible," Simmons said. "It's not my field, of course, but I can state with fair certainty that each fruit is a separate and distinct entity. They're not stages of each other."

"How do you account for it?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't have to," the biologist grinned. "But some poor botanist is going to have his hands full."

They turned and started to walk back. "What were you here for?" Kilpepper asked.

"Me? I was doing a little anthropological work on the side. Wanted to find out where our friends lived. No luck. There are no paths, implements, clearings, anything. Not even caves."

Kilpepper didn't think it unusual that a biologist should be

making a quick anthropological survey. It was impossible to represent all the sciences on an expedition of this sort. Survival was the first consideration—biology and bacteriology. Then language. After that, any botanical, ecological, psychological, sociological or any other knowledge was appreciated.

Eight or nine birds had joined the animals—or natives—around the ship when they got back. The birds were brilliantly colored also: polka dots, stripes, piebalds. There wasn't a dun or gray in the lot.

Mate Morena and Crewman Flynn trudged through an outcropping of the forest. They stopped at the foot of a little hill.

"Do we have to climb it?" Flynn asked, sighing. The large camera on his back was weighing him down.

"The little hand says we gotta." Morena pointed to his dial. The indicator showed the presence of metallic mass just over the rise.

"Spaceships ought to carry cars," Flynn said, leaning forward to balance himself against the gentle slope of the hill.

"Yeh, or camels."

Above them red and gold birds dipped and sailed, cheeping merrily. The breeze fanned the tall grass, and hummed melodiously

through the leaves and branches of the nearby forest. Behind them, two of the natives followed. They were horse-shaped, except for their hides of green and white dots.

"Like a bloody circus," Flynn observed, as one of the horses capered a circle around him.

"Yeh," Morena said. They reached the top of the hill and started down. Then Flynn stopped.

"Look at that!"

At the base of the hill, rising slim and erect, was a metal pillar. They followed it up with their eyes. It climbed and climbed—and its top was lost in the clouds.

They hurried down and examined it. Closer, the pillar was more massy than they had thought. Almost twenty feet through, Morena estimated. At a guess he placed the metal as an alloy of steel, by its gray-blue color. But what steel, he asked himself, could support a shaft that size?

"How high would you say those clouds are?" Morena asked.

Flynn craned his neck. "Lord, they must be half a mile up. Maybe a mile." The pillar had been hidden from the ship by the clouds, and by its gray-blue color which blended into the background.

"I don't believe it," Morena said. "I wonder what the com-

pression strain on this thing is." They stared in awe at the tremendous shaft.

"Well," Flynn said, "I'd better get some pictures." He unloaded his camera and snapped three shots of the shaft from twenty feet, then a shot with Morena for size comparison. For the next three pictures he sighted up the shaft.

"What do you figure it is?" Morena asked.

"Let the big brains figure it out," Flynn said. "It ought to drive them nuts." He strapped the camera back together. "Now I suppose we have to walk all the way back." He looked at the brown and green horses. "Wonder if I could hitch a ride."

"Go ahead and break your stupid neck," Morena said.

"Here, boy, come on here," Flynn called. One of the horses came over and knelt beside him. Flynn climbed on his back gingerly. Once he was astride he grinned at Morena.

"Just don't smash that camera," Morena said. "It's government property."

"Nice boy," Flynn said to the horse. "Good fellow." The horse got to his feet—and smiled.

"See you back in camp," Flynn said, guiding the horse toward the hill.

"Hold it a second," Morena said. He looked glumly at Flynn, then beckoned to the other horse.

"Come on, boy." The horse knelt and he climbed on.

They rode in circles for a few moments, experimenting. The horses could be guided by a touch. Their broad backs were amazingly comfortable. One of the red and gold birds came down and perched on Flynn's shoulder.

"Hey, hey, this is the life," Flynn said, patting the glossy hide of his mount. "Race you back to camp, Mate."

"You're on," Morena said. But their horses would move no faster than a slow walk, in spite of all their urging.

At the ship, Kilpepper was squatting in the grass, watching Aramic at work. The linguist was a patient man. His sisters had always remarked on his patience. His colleagues had praised him for it, and his students, during his years of teaching, had appreciated it. Now, the backlog of sixteen years of self-containment was being called to the front.

"We'll try it again," Aramic said in his calmest voice. He flipped through the pages of *Language Approach for Alien Grade Two Intelligences*—a text written by himself—and found the diagram he wanted. He opened to the page and pointed.

The animal beside him looked like an inconceivable cross be-

tween a chipmunk and a giant panda. It cocked one eye at the diagram, the other eye wandering ludicrously around its socket.

"Planet," Aramic said, pointing. "Planet."

"Excuse me, Skipper," Simmons said. "I'd like to set up this X-ray gadget here."

"Certainly," Kilpepper said, moving to let the biologist drag the machine into place.

"Planet," Aramic said again.

"Elam vessel holam cram," the chipmunk-panda said pleasantly.

Damn it, they had a language. The sounds they made were certainly representational. It was just a question of finding a common meeting ground. Had they mastered simple abstractions? Aramic put down his book and pointed to the chipmunk-panda.

"Animal," he said, and waited.

"Get him to hold still," Simmons said, focusing the X-ray. "That's good. Now a few more."

"Animal," Aramic repeated hopefully.

"Eeful beeful box," the animal said. "Hoful toful lox, ramadan, Samduran, eeful beeful box."

Patience, Aramic reminded himself. Positive attitude. Be cheerful. Faint heart never.

He picked up another of his manuals. This one was called *Language Approach to Alien Grade One Intelligences*.

He found what he wanted and put it down again. Smiling, he held up a finger.

"One," he said.

The animal leaned forward and sniffed his finger.

Smiling grimly, Aramic held up another finger. "Two." A third. "Three."

"Hoogelex," the animal said suddenly.

A diphthong? Their word for one? "One," he said again, waving the same finger.

"Vereserevef," the animal replied, beaming.

Could that be an alternate one? "One," he said again.

The animal burst into song.

"Sevef hevef ulud cram, aragan, biligan, homus dram—"

It stopped and looked at the *Language Approach* manual, fluttering in the air, and at the back of the linguist who, with remarkable patience, had refrained from throttling him.

After Morena and Flynn returned, Kilpepper puzzled over their report. He had the photographs rushed through and studied them with care.

The shaft was round and smooth, and obviously manufactured. Any race that could put up a thing like that could give them trouble. Big trouble.

But who had put the shaft up? Not the happy, stupid animals around the ship, certainly.

"You say the top is hidden in the clouds?" Kilpepper asked.

"Yes sir," Morena said. "That damn thing must be all of a mile high."

"Go back," Kilpepper said. "Take a radarscope. Take infra-red equipment. Get me a picture of the top of that shaft. I want to know how high it goes and what's on top of it. Quick."

Flynn and Morena left the bridge.

Kilpepper looked at the still-wet photographs for a minute longer, then put them down. He wandered into the ship's lab, vague worries nagging at him. The planet didn't make sense, and that bothered him. Kilpepper had discovered the hard way that there's a pattern to everything. If you can't find it in time, that's just too bad for you.

Morrison, the bacteriologist, was a small, sad man. Right now he looked like an extension of the microscope he was peering into.

"Find anything?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've found the absence of something," Morrison said, looking up and blinking. "I've found the absence of a hell of a lot of something."

"What's that?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've run tests on the flowers," Morrison said, "and I've run tests on the earth, and tests on

water samples. Nothing definitive yet, but brace yourself."

"I'm braced. What is it?"

"There isn't an ounce of bacteria on this planet!"

"Oh?" Kilpepper said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't consider it a particularly shocking announcement. But the bacteriologist was acting as if he had announced that the subsoil of the planet was one hundred per cent pure green cheese.

"That's it. The water in the stream is purer than distilled alcohol. The dirt on this planet is cleaner than a boiled scalpel. The only bacteria are the ones we brought. And they're being killed off."

"How?"

"The air of this place has about three disinfecting agents I've detected, and probably a dozen more I haven't. Same with the dirt and water. This place is sterile!"

"Well, now," Kilpepper said. He couldn't appreciate the full force of the statement. He was still worried about the steel shaft. "What does that mean?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Morrison said. "Yes, I'm really glad you asked me. It means simply that this place doesn't exist."

"Oh, come now."

"I mean it. There can't be life without microorganisms. One

whole section of the life cycle is missing here."

"Unfortunately, it does exist," Kilpepper pointed out gently. "Have you any other theories?"

"Yes, but I want to finish these tests first. But I'll tell you one thing, and maybe you can work it out for yourself."

"Go on."

"I haven't been able to detect a piece of rock on this planet. That's not strictly my field, of course—but we're all jacks-of-all-trades on this expedition. Anyhow, I'm interested in geology. There's no loose rock or stone anywhere around. The smallest stone is about seven tons, I'd estimate."

"What does that mean?"

"Ah! You were wondering also?" Morrison smiled. "Excuse me. I want to complete these tests before supper."

Just before sunset, the X-rays of the animals were finished. Kilpepper had another surprise. Morrison had told him that the planet couldn't exist. Then Simmons insisted the animals couldn't exist.

"Just look at these pictures," he said to Kilpepper. "Look. Do you see any organs?"

"I don't know much about X-rays. . . ."

"You don't have to. Just look." The X-ray showed a few bones and one or two organs. There

were traces of a nervous system on some of the pictures but, mostly, the animals seemed homogeneous throughout.

"Not enough internal structure to keep a tapeworm going," Simmons said. "This simplification is impossible. There's nothing corresponding to lungs or heart. No bloodstream. No brain. Damn little nervous system. What organs they have just don't make sense."

"And your conclusion—"

"That these animals don't exist," Simmons said, in high good humor. He liked the idea. It would be fun to do a paper on a non-existent animal.

Aramic passed them, swearing softly.

"Any luck on that lingo?" Simmons asked him.

"No!" Aramic shouted, then blushed. "Sorry. I tested them right down to intelligence grade C3BB. That's amoeba class. No response."

"Perhaps they're just completely brainless," Kilpepper suggested.

"No. The ability to do tricks shows a certain level of intelligence. They have a language of sorts, also, and a definite response pattern. But they won't pay any attention. All they do is sing songs."

"I think we all need supper," Kilpepper said. "And perhaps a slug or two of the old standby."

The old standby was much in evidence at supper. After a fifth or two had been consumed, the scientists mellowed sufficiently to consider some possibilities. They put together their facts.

Item, the natives—or animals—showed no sign of internal organs, no reproductive or excretive equipment. There seemed to be at least three dozen species, not counting birds, and more appearing every day.

The same with the plants.

Item, the planet was amazingly sterile, and acted to keep itself so.

Item, the natives had a language but evidently couldn't impart it to others. Nor could they learn another language.

Item, there were no small rocks or stone around.

Item, there was a tremendous steel shaft, rising to a height of at least half a mile, exact height to be determined when the new pictures were developed. Although there was no sign of a machine culture, the shaft was obviously the product of one. Someone must have built it and put it there.

"Throw it all together and what have you got?" Kilpepper asked.

"I have a theory," Morrison said. "It's a beautiful theory. Would you care to hear it?"

Everyone said yes except Aramic, who was still brooding over

his inability to learn the native language.

"The way I see it, this planet is man-made. It must be. No race would evolve without bacteria. It was made by a super race, the race who put that steel spire there. They built it for these animals."

"Why?" Kilpepper asked.

"This is the beautiful part," Morrison said dreamily. "Pure altruism. Look at the natives Happy, playful. Completely devoid of violence, rid of all nasty habits. Don't they deserve a world to themselves? A world where they can romp and play in an eternal summer?"

"That is beautiful," Kilpepper said, stifling a grin. "But—"

"These people are here as a reminder," Morrison continued. "A message to all passing races that men can live in peace."

"There's only one flaw in that," Simmons said. "The animals could never have evolved naturally. You saw the X-rays."

"That's true. . . ." The dreamer struggled briefly with the biologist, and the dreamer lost. "Perhaps they're robots."

"That's the explanation I favor," Simmons said. "The race that built the steel spire built these animals also. They're servants, slaves. Why, they might even think *we're* their masters."

"Where would the real masters have gone?" Morrison asked.

"How the hell should I know?" Simmons said.

"And where would these masters live?" Kilpepper asked. "We haven't spotted anything that looks like a habitation."

"They're so far advanced they don't need machines or houses. They live directly with nature."

"Then why do they need servants?" Morrison asked mercilessly. "And why did they build the spire?"

That evening the new pictures of the steel pillar were completed and the scientists examined them eagerly. The top of the pillar was almost a mile high, hidden in thick clouds. There was a projection on either side of the top, jutting out at right angles to a distance of eighty-five feet.

"Looks like it might be a watchtower," Simmons said.

"What could they watch that high up?" Morrison asked. "All they'd see would be clouds."

"Perhaps they like looking at clouds," Simmons said.

"I'm going to bed," Kilpepper stated, in utter disgust.

When Kilpepper woke up the next morning, something didn't feel right. He dressed and went outside. There seemed to be something intangible in the wind. Or was it just his nerves?

Kilpepper shook his head. He had faith in his premonitions.

They usually meant that, unconsciously, he had completed some process in reasoning.

Everything seemed to be in order around the ship. The animals were outside, wandering lazily around.

Kilpepper glared at them and walked around the ship. The scientists were back at work trying to solve the mysteries of the planet. Aramic was trying to learn the language from a mournful-eyed green and silver beast. The beast seemed unusually apathetic this morning. It barely muttered its songs, and paid no attention to Aramic.

Kilpepper thought of Circe. Could the animals be people, changed into beasts by some wicked sorcerer? He rejected the fanciful idea, and walked on.

The crew hadn't noticed anything different. They had headed, en masse, for the waterfall, to get in some swimming. Kilpepper assigned two men to make a microscopic inspection of the steel shaft.

That worried him more than anything else. It didn't seem to bother the other scientists, but Kilpepper figured that was natural. Every cobbler to his last. A linguist would be bound to attach primary importance to the language of the people, while a botanist would think the key to the planet lay in the multi-fruit bearing trees.

And what did he think? Captain Kilpepper examined his ideas. What he needed, he decided, was a field theory. Something that would unify all the observed phenomena.

What theory would do that? Why weren't there any germs? Why weren't there any rocks?

Why, why, why. Kilpepper felt sure that the explanation was relatively simple. He could almost see it—but not quite.

He sat down in the shade, leaning against the ship, and tried to think.

Around midday Aramic, the linguist, walked over. He threw his books, one by one, against the side of the ship.

"Temper," Kilpepper said.

"I give up," Aramic said. "Those beasts won't pay any attention now. They're barely talking. And they've stopped doing tricks."

Kilpepper got to his feet and walked over to the animals. Sure enough, they didn't seem at all lively. They crept around as though they were in the last stages of malnutrition.

Simmons was standing beside them, jotting down notes on a little pad.

"What's wrong with your little friends?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't know," Simmons said. "Perhaps they were so excited they didn't sleep last night."

The giraffe-like animal sat down suddenly. Slowly he rolled over on his side and lay still.

"That's strange," Simmons said. "First time I saw one of them do that." He bent over the fallen animal and searched for a heart beat. After a few seconds he straightened.

"No sign of life," he said.

Two of the smaller ones with glossy black fur toppled over.

"Oh lord," Simmons said, hurrying over to them. "What's happening now?"

"I'm afraid I know," Morrison said, coming out of the ship, his face ashen. "Germs."

"What are you talking about?"

"Captain, I feel like a murderer. I think we've killed these poor beasts. You remember, I told you there was no sign of any microorganism on this planet? Think of how many we've introduced! Bacteria streaming off our bodies onto these hosts. Hosts with no resistance, remember."

"I thought you said the air had several disinfecting agents?" Kilpepper asked.

"Evidently they didn't work fast enough." Morrison bent over and examined one of the little animals. "I'm sure of it."

The rest of the animals around the ship were falling now, and lying quite still. Captain Kilpepper looked around anxiously.

One of the crewmen dashed up, panting. He was still wet

from his swim by the waterfall.

"Sir," he gasped. "Over by the falls—the animals—"

"I know," he said. "Get all the men down here."

"That's not all, sir," the man said. "The waterfall—you know, the waterfall—"

"Well, spit it out, man."

"It's stopped, sir. It's stopped running."

"Get those men down here!" The crewmen sprinted back to the falls. Kilpepper looked around, not sure what he was looking for. The brown forest was quiet. Too quiet.

He almost had the answer. . . .

Kilpepper realized that the gentle, steady breeze that had been blowing ever since they landed, had stopped.

"What in hell is going on here?" Simmons said uneasily. They started backing toward the ship.

"Is the sun getting darker?" Morrison whispered. They weren't sure. It was mid-afternoon, but the sun did seem less bright.

The crewmen hurried back from the waterfall, glistening wet. At Kilpepper's order they piled back into the ship. The scientists remained standing, looking over the silent land.

"What could we have done?" Aramic asked. He shuddered at the sight of the fallen animals.

The men who had been exam-

ining the shaft came running down the hill, bounding through the long grass as though the devil himself were after them.

"What now?" Kilpepper asked.

"It's that damned shaft, sir!" Morena said. "It's turning!" The shaft—that mile-high mass of incredibly strong metal—was being turned!

"What are we going to do?" Simmons asked.

"Get back in the ship," Kilpepper muttered. He could feel the answer taking shape now. There was just one more bit of evidence he needed. One thing more—

The animals sprang to their feet! The red and silver birds started flying again, winging high into the air. The hippogiraffe reared to his feet, snorted, and raced off. The rest of the animals followed him. From the forest an avalanche of strange beasts poured onto the meadow.

At full speed they headed west, away from the ship.

"Get back in the ship!" Kilpepper shouted suddenly. That did it. He knew now, and he only hoped he could get the ship into deep space in time.

"Hurry the hell up! Get those engines going," he shouted to the gawking crewmen.

"But we've still got equipment scattered around," Simmons said. "I don't see any need for this—"

"Man the guns!" Captain Kilpepper roared, pushing the scientists toward the bay of the ship.

Suddenly there were long shadows in the west.

"Captain. We haven't completed our investigation yet—"

"You'll be lucky if you live through this," Kilpepper said, as they entered the bay. "Haven't you put it together yet? Close that bay! Get everything tight!"

"You mean the turning shaft?" Simmons said, stumbling over Morrison in the corridor of the ship. "All right, I suppose there's some super race—"

"That turning shaft is a key in the side of the planet," Kilpepper said, racing toward the bridge. "It winds the place up. The whole world is like that. Animals, rivers, wind—everything runs down."

He punched a quick orbit on

the ship's tape.

"Strap down," he said. "Figure it out. A place where all kinds of wonderful food hangs from the trees. Where there's no bacteria to hurt you, not even a sharp rock to stub your toes. A place filled with marvellous, amusing, gentle animals. Where everything's designed to delight you.

"A playground!"

The scientists stared at him.

"The shaft is a key. The place ran down while we made our unauthorized visit. Now someone's winding the planet up again."

Outside the port the shadows were stretching for thousands of feet across the green meadow.

"Hang on," Kilpepper said as he punched the takeoff stud. "Unlike the toy animals, I don't want to meet the children who play here. And I especially don't want to meet their parents."

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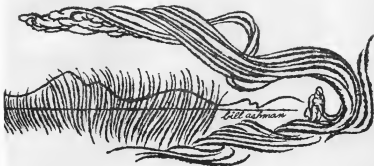
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Final Exam

By CHAD OLIVER

Illustrated by ASHMAN

Like a good number of our best writers, Chad Oliver (author of *Another Kind* and *Shadows in the Sun*) is primarily a scientist, an anthropologist, who writes science fiction for the sheer joy of it. But, like a good many more S-F professionals, he is also a former fan (a frequent contributor—in his salad days—to letter columns like our own). So when Chad Oliver writes a science-fiction story, we have learned to expect something special, a skillful blend of scientific speculation and a deeply satisfying story line, the kind readers really like. And that's what you'll find in "Final Exam," a shocker from Oliver—for all of us.

THE chartered spacer from Marsopolis settled into Ed Crowley's private field on her antigravs, hardly disturbing a blade of the lavender grass. There was a moment of silence in the thin air—and then the students came out.

They weren't all students, of course. B. Barratt Osborne, the writer, was present, and so were a lame spaceman and his young son. But most of the passengers were members of Dr. Thomas La Farge's famous class in Advanced Martian History 482, the pride of the American Academy. This was their field trip.

"There's one," Charlotte Stevens said excitedly. "Look at him!"

It was a real live Martian, all right. He climbed slowly down out of a baggage truck and walked toward them. He was very tall and slender and awkward-looking—just like the pictures. His skin was reddish and he had a shock of snow-white hair. His slanted eyes were a deep and liquid green. He seemed to look through rather than at the group standing outside the ship, and he said nothing at all.

"Observe, observe," whispered Dr. Thomas La Farge. "I told you they never said anything."

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"Look, Daddy," Bobby Fitzgerald said loudly, pulling on his

father's sleeve. "Look at the funny Martian."

"Over here, my good man," Professor La Farge instructed. "The bags are on the ship. Captain Stuart will show you."

The Martian nodded and went into the ship without a word.

"That was Two," the professor explained. "As you know, they have no proper names."

"Well," sniffed Pat Somerset, smoothing her skirt over her silken legs. "He didn't seem very friendly, I *must* say."

"That's the way they are," the professor said. "They are like children."

Wilson Thorne, dressed campus-style in gray flannel slacks and plaid sport coat, peered out from behind his horn-rimmed glasses, puffed on his Sherlockian calabash pipe, and nodded wisely. You and I, Prof, his manner intimated. We understand each other.

They all piled into one of Ed Crowley's sleek transports that was parked on the side of the field. Professor La Forge knowingly pressed the destination stud and they hummed into motion. The white plastirock road cut through forests of lavender grass five feet tall, and the air was sweet with the smell of flowers.

The Ranch House, a rambling structure carved out of polished Martian redwood, nestled at the

foot of a low range of purple hills. Orange flower trees dotted the hillsides. A soft breeze rustled through the grasses. To their left they could see the deserted remains of what had once been a Martian shrine.

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"A characteristic Martian landscape," noted the professor.

"Nuts," said B. Barratt Osborne, a gentleman notoriously contemptuous of any and all sentiments not expressed to perfection by B. Barratt Osborne.

John Fitzgerald tried to keep his bad leg out of the way and watched his son's face. Bobby was drinking it all in. It must be pretty wonderful to him, he figured. The way it had been to himself when he had first seen it.

The transport stopped precisely in front of the Ranch House.

"There's Ed Crowley," the professor said in a low voice. "Not a man of refinement by any means, but you must remember that the largest extant group of Martians is located on his property."

Ed Crowley, a rotund individual hiding behind a venomous black cigar, rolled up to the transport and waved cheerily.

"Good to see you, what I mean," he chortled in the deep, hoarse voice that signified that the great man was well into his second bottle. "Had about given

you up for lost. How ya, Einstein? Good to see you."

Dr. Thomas La Farge shook his hand with simulated heartiness, and introduced his retinue. B. Barratt Osborne already knew the great man, of course. He knew everybody.

"Yes, sir," Ed Crowley growled, rubbing his hands together. "Just in time to get freshed up some and take in the native Death Dance tonight under the old twin moons. You just make yourselves right at home, what I mean. Boy!"

A Martian appeared from around a corner. He looked just like the first one to untrained eyes. And it was funny—no matter how close you stood to him, he seemed coldly far away.

"Hello, One," the professor said. "How are things?"

One nodded his head perceptibly and contributed a sum total of no statements on the state of things.

"A genu-wine Martian, what I mean," Ed Crowley said proudly. "You just take a good look at him; he don't mind. One, show these people to their rooms. Anyone care to join me in a shot of bourbon?"

"Silly question of the year," commented B. Barratt Osborne. He linked his arm in that of his host and followed the great man into the Ranch House. The others trooped off behind One, whose

presence put something of a damper on the conversation. He was so *different*.

"He gives me the creeps," hissed Pat Somerset, running her slim fingers through her blonde hair.

"Shhhh!" whispered Charlotte Stevens. "He'll hear you."

"Martians sure are funny," Bobby Fitzgerald said loudly.

Wilson Thorne smoked his calabash, looked knowing, and kept close to the professor. They walked through a hall carved out of astonishing redwood, and there were strange pictures on the walls. Outside, as a pale sun floated down behind the Martian hills, the long evening shadows crept through the tall grasses, and the wind turned cold out of the north.

After they had dressed and put on warm jackets, John Fitzgerald and his son left their room and went to rejoin the others. Silver lamps hung from cross beams and turned the redwood halls a deep golden brown. The dark paintings withdrew into the shadows and waited with an old, old patience.

"What happened to the Martians, Daddy?" Bobby asked, his bright blue eyes shining in his freshly scrubbed face.

"We happened to the Martians."

"I think they're funny. Why did we kill them?"

"We didn't kill them . . . exactly. Oh, there were some of them that tried to fight, but they didn't have anything to fight with; no guns, no ships, nothing. Disease got most of them, and nobody knows what happened to the rest. They just disappeared."

"Why?"

"I think maybe they had a crystal ball, son."

John Fitzgerald tried not to limp as they entered the brightly lighted living room where the others were. He felt vaguely out of place here, even more so than at Marsopolis.

He noticed that Pat Somers had changed into a black satin dress—evidently her idea of just the thing for a Martian field trip. She was giving him the eye, as usual, and he tried not to laugh. Charlotte Stevens was listening enraptured to Ed Crowley, who was exercising his host's prerogative of talking loud and long.

"When I first came to Mars, there wasn't a first-class bar this side of Marsopolis," the great man announced. "Strictly for the birds, what I mean. Just a bunch of spacemen—no offense, Mr. Fitzgerald—and scenery. Me, I took this part of the old planet over and made it into a tourist's paradise. Swimming, night rides under the moons of Mars, fishing in the cold mountain streams, all that junk. Educational, too, what with the old brick piles and Mar-

tians and all. I've made this planet into a paying proposition, I'll tell you, and I got where I am today through my own efforts."

"Hear, hear," said B. Barratt Osborne, into his bourbon.

"Now, you know I ain't the man to brag," Ed Crowley assured them. "But I've done something with this joint, what I mean. It's got *class*."

"Tell us about the Martians," Charlotte Stevens breathed.

"There were lots of 'em around once—ain't that right, Mr. Fitzgerald? The boys on the early ships saw 'em. But now there's just a few in the cities and on the other land grants, so far as anyone knows. I've got ten of 'em right here and that's the most I ever saw together at one time."

"Gosh," said Charlotte Stevens.

"Jeepers *creepers*," said B. Barratt Osborne.

"I'll tell you," the great man continued. "Them Martians of mine guide the tourists, meet the ships, put on dances, and kinda prowl around addin' color to the joint. Me, I'm a tolerant man. I treat them Martians right, and I don't see where they got any cause to complain, what I mean. Them Martians, they're sorta screwy, but they're just like kids; you gotta handle them right."

"That, in essence, is quite correct," spoke up Professor La Farge. "As you perhaps know, I

took a group of Martian gray rats and ran them through some rather intricate maze problems. Their psychological patterns were definitely child-like, and by use of the La Farge Equivalents Equation, I was able to apply my findings to the Martians as a whole. You are, I trust, familiar with my monograph on the subject."

"Nuts," said B. Barratt Osborne, thus upholding his interplanetary reputation for sarcastic wit. Wilson Thorne puffed on his calabash and solemnly entered the devastating remark in a notebook.

"Well, anyhow, it's about time we got this shebang on the road," Ed Crowley said. "That Death Dance is really the cat's whiskers, what I mean. Last authentic art form of a dying race and all that gas. Now, if you'll all just leave your ten bucks in this little old box here . . ."

Everyone crowded around and deposited ten dollars in the box except, of course, B. Barratt Osborne, who naturally was entitled to special privileges because he was such a funny fellow. John Fitzgerald noticed that Pat Somerset was busily engaged in patting his son on the head.

"My, what a fine little boy!" she cooed.

"Say thank you to the nice lady," John Fitzgerald said.

"Thank you," Bobby said dutifully.

"Two!" yelled Ed Crowley. "Hey, Two! Now where the devil is that damned Martian?"

The students followed the great man out into the night.

The wind had died, and it was cold and still under the moons of Mars. John Fitzgerald shivered as he helped Bobby into the transport. One of the Martians took over the manual controls. His tall body was clumsy in the narrow space, and his waves of snow-white hair almost touched the top of the vehicle.

"One thing about them natives," Ed Crowley said. "They learn fast."

"Cultural diffusion," offered Dr. La Farge. "It works both ways."

Ed Crowley picked up a voice amplifier, not that he needed one.

"Now notice," he launched into his prepared commentary. "Notice the characteristic night flowers blooming in forgotten splendor under the beautiful twin moons of Mars, Phobos and Deimos. That means Fear and Panic, you know. Fear and Panic are the ancient companions of Mars, who back on Earth was thought of as the god of war. It is hard to believe, looking at this peaceful world, that it could ever have been connected with such a thing as war. We are now approaching an abandoned shrine where in bygone days . . ."

John Fitzgerald didn't listen; glib second-hand sentiment always made him uncomfortable. Personally, he wished that Crowley would shut up.

It was as bright as the western plains under a full moon on Earth. The tall grasses were a sea of silver under the stars. The air was clear and cold. Looking at it you could almost imagine that nothing had changed, that it was all the way it had been before the Earthmen came. . . .

The transport stopped. They all got out and hurried down a path through the motionless grasses. They came to a clearing where rows of stone benches gleamed whitely in the iced light of the moons.

"Here we are," Ed Crowley said. "It won't be long now."

They waited.

The stone benches were cold and lonely. The little group of visitors huddled together in the stillness. Pat Somerset fished a perfumed cigarette out of her purse and puffed on it until it lit. The grass was still, the shadows black. The darkness was alive.

Across the clearing—movement.

"Here come the funny Martians!" Bobby cried.

"Now look out," said B. Barratt Osborne.

"It's about to begin," said the professor.

The Martians came out of the

shadows and the dance was on.

There wasn't any music—or was there? John Fitzgerald wasn't sure. There were no instruments that he could see, and the dancers did not appear to be singing. And yet there *was* something—a feeling, a rhythm, a silver melody that shivered up your spine.

The Martians danced, and they weren't funny any more. Their white hair stood out vividly in the moonlight, and their slender bodies moved with fluid grace. They belonged somehow—belonged there in the clearing with the grasses all around them and the purple hills silent in the distance. And the music

"It's a little different each time," the professor said.

"All we need now is Frankenstein's monster to make this party really gay," said Pat Somerset.

"Shhhh!" whispered Charlotte Stevens. "I think they're *cute*."

Wilson Thorne smoked his pipe and took frantic notes in his brown notebook.

It was a strange dance—quiet and unhurried and almost randomness in its movements. But there were patterns in the graceful movements of the dancers, Fitzgerald noticed. It was like a slow-motion pantomime. Half of the Martians executed apparently meaningless steps with their eyes closed. The other half circled

them slowly, and then came in for the kill, over and over again.

The Death Dance.

John Fitzgerald felt a chill race through his body. The whole thing was eerie. The Martians seemed to kill with knives and hands and guns and rays. They never missed. The Martians had no guns, no rays, he told himself. The dance went on, neither rising nor falling in intensity. There was no emotional build-up, no climax. It just went on.

"They are a dying race," the professor said.

"I think they're crazy," said Pat Somerset, pulling her fur coat closer around her satin dress.

"They're so *quaint*," said Charlotte Stevens.

As suddenly as it had begun, the dance was over. The Martians faded back into the shadows, and the feeling of music was gone. The clearing was empty.

"So that's what we came all the way from Marsopolis to see," Pat Somerset said. "Give me the floor show at the Crystal Room any day."

"That's enough, Miss Somerset," the professor said. "I must say that I'm disappointed in you—*most* disappointed."

Pat Somerset smiled coolly at him. She got back into the transport, and the others followed her. A Martian was already at the controls.

"I've been working on the functional aspects of the Death Dance," Professor La Farge announced as they hummed through the night back to the Ranch House. "My anthropologist friends tell me that such ceremonial dances always have some function in a total culture, whether or not the participants are aware of it. This was true of the old Indian dances back on Earth. You have perhaps seen some of the pictures that were taken of the dances as recently as 1980? Not the real thing, of course, since their culture was hardly their own anymore, and they were just going on with a tradition that had outlived its usefulness. But you get the idea. Those ceremonies were used to integrate the society, to train the children, to dramatize their religions, to enforce authority—all sorts of things. But there was always a *true* function, as opposed to what went on out in the open. This Death Dance presents an interesting problem; it may take some weeks to work it out fully. My theory is that it represents the resignation of the Martians to their fate. They are dying out, you see, and . . ."

"Knock it off," hissed B. Barratt Osborne. "Spies are everywhere!"

The students giggled, and Wilson Thorne made another entry in his notebook.

"Daddy," Bobby whispered, "I want to go home."

John Fitzgerald looked at his son. Funny—he'd had the same idea himself, an inexplicable urge to leave, to get off the planet. Mars was so different from the world that he had known—and yet he had helped to make it this way. And these people . . .

"Okay, Bobby," he said quietly. "It hasn't turned out for you the way I had hoped it would, and I'm sorry. We'll take a copter to Marsopolis in the morning, and tomorrow night we'll be on the ship for Earth! How'll that be?"

"Swell," Bobby said happily.

They went on through the clean, cold air, and the Martian grasses were coated with silver in the moonlight.

The next night all the lights in the Ranch House were on, blazing their glare into the darkness. A north wind whined across the fields and lost itself in the rock canyons of the mountains. One of the two small moons was just rising over the horizon, and the stars were bright and cold.

Ed Crowley, Professor La Farge and B. Barratt Osborne were playing hit the bottle in front of a roaring fire in the massive fireplace of the great living room. The fire threw out flickering shadows that cavorted playfully among the redwood cross beams on the ceiling.

"One!" shouted Ed Crowley.

No answer.

"One!"

Silence.

"Where the devil are those Martians?" he inquired of no one in particular. "Haven't seen one of 'em in hours. Never around when you need them, what I mean."

"Like children," Professor La Farge mumbled. "Jes' like children, jes' like li'l kids."

"Ah, yes," said B. Barratt Osborne, fixing himself another drink. "Speaking of children, where *are* the junior geniuses?"

"They're throwing a shindig down at the river," Ed Crowley informed him. "Might kinda wander down that way myself a little later. That Pat Somerset is some dish, what I mean."

"If you like dishes," the great writer said very casually.

"Now wait a minute," the professor objected. "Now jes' you wait a li'l ol' *minute*. I'm response—response—"

"Responsible," supplied B. Barratt Osborne.

"Yes. Responsible. I tell you, I'm responsible for—for—what was I saying?"

"Forget it," suggested B. Barratt Osborne.

Ed Crowley sank into an armchair. "What I want to know is where are those Martians?" he complained. "The old dump feels . . . different."

The wind blew cold in the night.

"You need a drink," said B. Barratt Osborne.

It was chilly, somehow, in the room. The fire blazed away and the bourbon did its best, but there was a persistent coldness in the air. Loud in the silence, a shutter banged monotonously against the wall.

The adjusted Terra Clock struck eleven.

"I'd just like to know where those damned Martians went to," Ed Crowley said nervously.

The shadows played on the walls. And something *moved* in the dark corner.

"What was that?" B. Barratt Osborne asked sharply.

"I didn't—"

"*There*—there in the corner. Something's there."

The great fire crackled in the fireplace.

"One!" Ed Crowley said loudly. "One, is that you?"

No answer.

"One! If that's you, I'll skin you alive!"

Shadows. Ed Crowley hefted a bottle angrily and got to his feet.

"For the last time," he threatened in a high, thin voice. "Come out of there!"

The thing came out. It *was* One, right enough—but he wasn't alone. There were others with him. Martians. Quite suddenly,

the room was full of Martians. They walked in through the doors and crawled through the windows. They came down the stairs. There were hundreds of them—tall and thin and awkward-looking. Their snow-white hair was vivid under the lights, their cold green eyes steady and unblinking. They were armed. Armed with guns and rays and tubes and various metallic things which no man had ever seen before.

Ed Crowley dropped his bottle.

"Here come the funny Martians!" said One.

"Now look out," said Two.

"It's about to begin," said Three.

The night pressed in against the house.

"You *talk*," whispered Ed Crowley.

"We talk," agreed One. He kept coming.

The three men crouched against the wall by the fireplace, their faces white and wet with sweat.

"The guns, the rays! So many of you. Where—"

"There are millions of us," One said coldly.

"Millions? All dead, dying—"

"We have lived in the caves under the mountains for fifty years," Two said steadily. His green eyes were like ice. "They were quite elaborate caves, and we went there when it became evident that we could not other-

wise hold out against the madmen from Earth. We fixed it so that we could not be found, and we went to work. We have powers, you know. We can read minds, and we heard every word that you ever spoke. We sent spies out to learn about your ships and guns—and we made a few improvements of our own. We sent out spies—and you took them in as tourist attractions."

The Martians laughed. Soundlessly.

"One thing about them natives," Three said. "They learn fast."

"They are like children," One said.

The Martians came closer. They reached out their thin hands and touched the terrified men. They took them out into the cold night and put them in the transport.

"Are—are you going to kill us all?" asked Professor La Farge shakily.

"Not all," said One cheerfully. "Most. A few, like the learned children on the river, we will keep. For tourist attractions, you know."

Professor La Farge began to sob brokenly.

"Notice the characteristic night flowers," Two said ironically as the transport hummed through the stillness. His voice was edged with hate. "Notice

them blooming in forgotten splendor under the beautiful twin moons of Mars. We are now approaching an abandoned shrine, where in bygone days"

The transport stopped.

"No," whispered N. Barratt Osborne.

The Martians took them into the shrine where it was cold and still. They had waited a long time.

"Don't do it, don't do it," cried Ed Crowley, falling to his knees. "We've learned our lesson . . . learned our lesson. We'll go away—never bother you again, never. It's your planet, just like always. You can have it back again."

"I'm afraid that won't do," Three said tonelessly. "Unhappily for you, we have learned *our* lesson too. Mars is old, exhausted. We don't want our planet back."

"Then what do you want?"

"*Yours*," Three said.

Back at the Ranch House, the Terra Clock struck twelve.

The Martians moved in for the kill, just as millions of their brethren were doing all over Mars. With guns and rays and ships spawned under the mountains.

Ed Crowley screamed.

"They are a dying race," said One.

"I think they're crazy," said Two.

"They're so *quaint*," said Three.

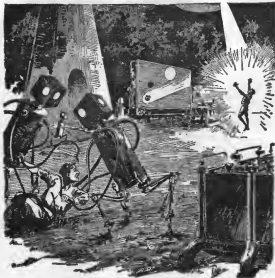
It was all over in minutes. The students had learned their lesson well. Smoothly, inexorably, while Fear and Panic raced through the night, they took their home back from their teachers.

That same morning, with a roar that shook the planet, the great Martian rockets blasted off for Earth.

Don't Miss

KEITH LAUMER'S NEW NOVEL AXE AND DRAGON

IN THE NOVEMBER FANTASTIC
Now On Sale



THE COMET DOOM

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Illustrator: FRANK R. PAUL

If you've read "Sunfire," "The Stars, My Brothers," and "Requiem" (some of his recent work here in Amazing), you already know that Edmond Hamilton is one of our best writers of modern science fiction, but how many of us fully appreciate what that means? Here is a writer (his first work appeared way back in the late 1920's) who has kept on being "modern" for more than a quarter of a century. Today we know him as a sensitive, skilled and accomplished craftsman. Yesterday he was "World Saver" Hamilton (the nickname readers affectionately gave him), who story after story offered wonder, excitement and originality on a cosmic scale. As a sample of that earlier Hamilton, here is one of the best of his cosmic tales. In fact, it is the very first story he did for Amazing. It also turned out to be an auspicious beginning for a long association between a promising young writer and an exciting new magazine.

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DESTINY.

We know, now. Destiny, from the first. Out in the depths of space the colossal conspiracy came into being. Across the miles and years, it sped toward its climax. Flashed toward our earth, toward that last supreme moment when a world stood at the edge of doom. Then—fate spoke.

Circling planet, blazing sun, far flung star, these things but the turning wheels of fate's machinery. And that other thing, that supernally beautiful, supernally dreadful thing that flamed across the heavens in a glory of living light, that too but a part of the master-mechanism. Destiny, all of it, from the beginning. And that beginning—

The story, as we know it, is Marlin's story, and the beginning, to him, was always that June evening when he first came to the Ohio village of Garnton, just at sunset. He had trudged up over the ridge of a long hill, when the place burst suddenly upon his vision.

Before him, sweeping away to the misty horizon, lay the steel-blue expanse of Lake Erie, smoke-plumes far out on its surface marking the passage of steamers. In the west the setting sun glowed redly, its level rays tipping the drifting clouds with flame. And just below him, stretched along the lake shore,

lay Garnton, a straggling assemblage of neat, white-painted buildings.

The sight was a grateful one to Marlin's eyes, and he contemplated it for a few moments from the ridge, inhaling great breaths of the sweet, cold air. A plump little man of middle age, dressed in stained khaki clothes and crush hat, rucksack on back, his blue eyes surveying the scene below with evident pleasure. A large white building beside the lake caught his eye, and he gazed at it with sudden intentness.

"Hotel," he muttered to himself, with conviction. And then, in a tone rich with anticipation—"Supper!"

The thought spurred him to renewed action, and hitching his knapsack higher on his shoulders, he began to tramp down toward the village. For though Marlin had so far yielded to the gypsy lure of the open road as to spend his vacation in a walking-tour, he was as yet not at all insensible to the civilized comforts that might be obtained at hotels. It was with quickened speed that he trudged on toward the village, over a rutted dirt road. Even so, twilight was darkening by the time he entered the dim, quiet hotel in quest of room and supper.

Complete darkness had descended on the world, and complete contentment on Marlin, by

the time he sauntered out of the big dining-room and inspected his surroundings. He wandered into the lobby but found it uninviting. A few magazines of the type associated with dentists' waiting-rooms, and the only newspaper in sight in the joint possession of three oldsters who were fiercely arguing a question of local politics. When Marlin ventured to interject a remark, they regarded him with cold suspicion, and somewhat abashed he retreated to the wide veranda.

It was quite dark on the veranda, but he managed to stumble into a chair. Then, a moment later, he discovered that the chair beside him was occupied by the proprietor of the hotel, a very fat man who sat in silence like a contemplative Buddha, hands clasped across his stomach, chewing tobacco and gazing out into the darkness. His attitude was of such calm dignity that Marlin hesitated to disturb him with foolish speech, but, unexpectedly, the Buddha spoke.

"Tourist?" he asked, without turning, speaking in a deep, rumbling voice, like that of a questioning judge.

"Hiking," Marlin answered; "I've walked half-way around the lake, from my home-town over in Ontario. I guess I'll rest here for a day or two, and then get a boat back."

The fat man spat over the

veranda-rail, accurately, and then uttered a grunt of acquiescence. He offered no further remark, and the two sat on in silence.

Looking out over the lake, Marlin absorbed with quickening interest all the beauty of the scene. There was no moon, but stars powdered the heavens like diamond-dust on black velvet, shedding a thin white light on the dark, tossing surface of the lake. To Marlin, gazing into that vista of cool, limitless night, the whole world seemed shrouded in quiet peace.

Abruptly, at the eastern horizon, a ghostly green radiance began to pour up from behind the distant waters. It pulsated, gathered, grew stronger and stronger. Then, seeming to clear the horizon with a single bound, there leaped up into the sky a disk of brilliant green light, as large as the absent moon. Like a huge, glowing emerald of fire it was, and from it there streamed a great green trail of light, stretching gigantically across the heavens.

The fat man, too, was regarding it.

"It gets bigger each night," he commented.

Marlin agreed. "It certainly does. You can see the difference from one night to the next. It says in the papers that it's coming millions of miles closer each night."

"They say it ain't going to hit us, though," remarked the other.

"No danger of that," Marlin assured him; "on the 14th—that's three nights from now—it will pass closest to earth, they say. But even then it'll be millions of miles away, and after that it'll be going further away all the time."

The fat man became oracular. "A comet's a queer thing," he stated, his eyes on that green splendor of light.

Marlin nodded assent. "This one's queer enough, I guess. What with its green color, and all. They say no one knows where it came from or where it's going. Just comes out of space, rushes down toward the sun and around it, and then rushes back into space, like it's doing now. Like a big tramp, wandering around among the stars."

The hotel-proprietor regarded him with new respect. "You must know a good bit about them," he said.

Flattered, Marlin yet deprecated the compliment. "Oh, I just read the papers a good bit. And there's been a lot in them about the comet since they first discovered its presence in the sky."

"But what's it made of?" asked the other. "Is it solid, like the earth?"

The smaller man shook his head. "I don't know. Some say it's solid at the nucleus—that's

the bright spot in its head—and some say that the whole comet's nothing but light and gas. Nobody knows for sure, I guess."

Together they stared up at the shining thing. The fat one shook his head in slow doubt.

"I don't like the looks of it," he asserted. "It's too big—and bright."

"No harm in it," Marlin assured him; "it won't come near enough to hurt us any. They've got it all calculated, you know, all worked out. These professors—"

Unconvinced, the other continued to stare up at the brilliant comet. And Marlin too regarded it, chin in hand, fantastic thoughts passing through his brain.

Many another chance watcher was gazing up toward the comet that night. The thief prowling in the shadows looked over his shoulder at it, muttering curses against its green, revealing light. The hospital-patient, lying un-sleeping in his dim-lit chamber, watched it through his window with sick eyes. The policeman, sauntering through darkened streets, spared it a casual glance.

And in the darkened observatories, others, hurrying, excited men, worked unceasingly with lens and spectroscope and photographic plate. With a myriad delicate instruments they sought for data on the nearing comet,

for this great green wanderer from outer space, known to be the largest and speediest comet ever to enter the solar system, was swinging out again from the sun on its outward journey into space. There remained but a few nights more before it would have attained its nearest position to earth, and after that it would flash out into the void, perhaps to reappear thousands of years hence, perhaps never to return. From its first appearance as a far, tiny speck of light, their telescopes had watched it, and would watch it until it had receded again into the infinity of inter-stellar space. Data!—that was their cry. Later all could be examined, marshalled, correlated; but now, if ever, data must be obtained and recorded.

Yet they had found time, from the first, to send out reassuring messages to the world. The comet would not come within millions of miles of earth, for all its size and brilliance, and it was impossible for it to collide with or bring any harm to the earth. Though no man could know what lay hidden at the nucleus, the comet's heart, it was known that the great, awesome coma and tail were nothing but light and electrical force and tenuous gases, with hardly more mass than the aurora borealis, and as harmless. There was nothing to be feared from its passing.

With that calm reassurement, few indeed felt any anxiety concerning the thing. And with that reassurement in mind, Marlin could repeat to the doubting man beside him—"It won't affect us any. The thing's been all worked out."

But to that his host made no answer, and for a time they sat in thoughtful silence.

Abruptly there drifted across their vision, some distance out on the lake, but seeming quite near, a great, high-built boat, its four decks ablaze with yellow light. Very clearly, over the water, they could hear the sound of its paddles, and could hear, too, a faint, far sound of singing, and a ghostly thrumming of ukeleles and guitars.

The fat man nodded toward it. "Excursion-boat from Cleveland," he pronounced.

As it came nearer, the sounds from it came more distinctly to their ears, borne on a little breeze. Clear young voices, singing a popular melody of the day. Tuneful young voices and throbbing music, drifting across the summer night. Fascinated, Marlin watched it. And over in the eastern sky, the flaming orb seemed to be watching also, like a great malignant eye, green, baleful, immense. . . .

IT was on the next morning that there appeared in the newspa-

pers the first dispatch from the Buell Observatory. It has sometimes been stated that that first dispatch "aroused widespread interest," but such an assertion is quite untrue, as even a casual inspection of the newspapers for that date will disclose. Only a few of them printed the item at all, and those who did so, assigned it inconspicuous positions.

The message itself was signed by Lorrow, the head of the Buell institution, and stated simply that a slight increase in the earth's orbital speed had been detected during the last twenty-four hours. It added that while this apparent increase might be due to erratic instruments, it was being given further attention. A few hours later a second message announced that the increase had been definitely confirmed, and that it was somewhat greater than had been at first believed.

To astronomers, the news was startling enough, for to them this sudden acceleration of the earth's speed seemed quite inexplicable. Their calculations assured them that it could not be due to the influence of any known heavenly body, but what, then, was its cause? They attacked the problem with exasperated interest.

Outside of astronomical circles, though, it is doubtful if there were a thousand people

who gave any serious attention to those first two statements. In science, as in all else, the public's attention is centred always upon the spectacular, and it took but little interest in this matter of fractional differences in speed. The only reference to it in the newspapers that evening was a short message from the Washington Observatory, which confirmed Lorrow's discovery and stated the exact amount of speed-increase, with a staggering array of fractions, decimals and symbols. It also stated that this acceleration was only momentary, and would disappear within the next twenty-four hours.

So the few puzzled over the matter, and the many shrugged their shoulders at mention of it, while the sun sank down into the west and darkness stole across the world. And then the night was split by the rising comet, driving up above the horizon and soaring toward the zenith. It flashed across the heavens in green glory and then it too rocketed down toward the west, while in the east there crept up the gray light of dawn. It was then that there came to the world Lorrow's third message.

It sped along a thousand humming wires, roared from the presses in a thousand cities, was carried shouting through ten thousand sleeping streets. Men woke, and read, and wondered,

and stared at each other in strange, dawning fear. For instead of returning to its normal speed, they learned the earth was moving faster and faster through the heavens, and already, as a consequence of this increased speed, was beginning to veer outward a little from its accustomed orbit.

"If this inexplicable acceleration continues," Lorrow wrote, "and the earth veers still further outward, it will be brought uncomfortably close to the head of the passing comet."

A sudden doubt, a moment of chilling fear, oppressed the world as those first words of warning were flashed around it. Had Lorrow's message been allowed to stand uncontradicted, it might well have precipitated a panic then and there. But it was not allowed to do so, for before many minutes had passed, there came from a score of observatories indignant denials of Lorrow's statements.

They admitted that the unexplained acceleration of the earth's speed was apparently continuing, but they denied that the planet had swerved from its orbit, and poured scorn upon the idea that it might collide with the nearing comet. Such a thing was impossible, they asserted, and quoted innumerable authorities to prove that the earth would not come within millions

of miles of the comet. Lorrow they denounced as a cheap alarmist who sought to gain publicity for himself at the expense of the world's fear. There was no danger. They repeated it, they insisted upon it. There was no danger.

Such statements were effective, and by means of them the first fears of the public were soon calmed. Here and there one might read with knitted brow and look up in sudden apprehension, and here and there in observatories men might glance at each other with startled eyes, but in the main, the currents of life pulsed through their accustomed channels, and through that long June day men walked their ways as always.

It is with a stilled, incredulous wonder that we now look back upon that day. Knowing what was to happen, what was happening even then, we see that day as the last of an era, the final hour of the world's doom. But at the time, it must have seemed like any other day in early June.

Children released from long months of school would be running and shouting, no doubt. There would be men gazing out of office-windows, their thoughts on green links and winding roads. And women chatting in the markets. And sleepy cats, on porches, sprawling in the sunshine. . . .

The newspapers that evening

announced that the comet would be larger when it rose that night, and explained that this increase in size was due to the fact that the great green wanderer was still steadily nearing earth, on its way out of the solar system. On the next night it would reach its closest position to earth, they stated, and thereafter would soon grow smaller until it vanished from sight entirely. It was believed that when the comet departed from the solar system, the mysterious acceleration of the earth's speed would disappear also. In any case, they repeated, there was no danger. . . .

Night came, and almost at once the eastern heavens flamed ghastly green. Across the sky streamed brilliant trails of emerald light, obscuring the familiar stars, tarnishing their glory. The radiance in the east condensed, dazzled, and then there flamed up above the horizon—the comet.

It rose that night like a great green sun, immeasurably increased in size and splendor, flooding the earth with its throbbing radiance. The tremendous coma, the brilliant nucleus, the vast tail—they flared in the heavens like a new green Milky Way. And across the millions who watched, there sped whispers of awe.

For millions there were who watched the comet rise that

night. From the roofs and windows and streets and parks of great cities, they watched it. Savages in deep jungles prostrated themselves before it, uttering weird cries of fear. Sailors far out at sea looked up toward it and spoke of ancient superstitions and old beliefs. Men in prison gazed up at it through barred windows, with dim wonder. Fearful men pointed toward it and spoke of the wrath of God.

Yet even then, for all the millions who watched in awe, there were tens of millions who merely glanced at it as one might at an interesting spectacle, who discussed it weightily, or giped at the fears of the timid, or who paid it no attention at all, going about their good or evil business unheeding. And as the hours marched on, fearful and indifferent alike sought sleep, while over forests and fields and seas and steeped cities, the giant meteor soared across the heavens. Almost it seemed to grow greater with the passing of each hour, and the whole west flared with livid light as it sank down toward the horizon there.

From a window perched high above the canyoned streets of New York City, a single man watched the setting of the comet. Through the night the news of Amsterdam and Hong-Kong and Valparaiso had passed through his ears and brain and fingers,

from clicking telegraph to clicking typewriter, to be circulated by the presses in the building beneath him. Now, as he leaned beside the open window, the cigarette in his hand drooped listlessly, and beneath the green eyeshade his eyes were very tired.

A sudden metallic chattering at the other side of the room aroused him, and instantly he turned and hastened toward the operating table. With a swift, automatic movement he slid fresh paper into his typewriter and began tapping out a copy of the message. As the instrument beside him clicked on, however, his body tensed in the chair, and he struck the typewriter-keys with a sudden clumsiness. When the sounder's chattering had ceased, he sat motionless, staring at the words he had written, then rose, trembling, and walked with dragging steps toward the window.

Around and beneath him the city slept, silent beneath the first gray light of dawn. Westward, the Jersey heights loomed darkly against the sky, and low above them spun the gigantic comet, its splendor dulling a little in the pallid light of dawn. It was the comet that the man at the window was watching, his face white, his lips working.

"It is doom!" he whispered.

From far below came a sudden whistling of tugboats, clamorous, strident. It ceased, and a

faint echo of his words murmured mockingly in his ears.

"Doom!"

He turned suddenly and reached for a telephone, pressing a button at its base. When he spoke into the instrument, his voice was dry and level.

"Collins?" he asked. "This is Brent, first night-operator. Take a bulletin that just came through. Ready?"

"Washington, D. C., June 14th. Special Bulletin. (All papers copy.) Astronomers at the Washington Observatory have just discovered that as a result of its mysterious acceleration in speed, the earth has left its proper orbit and is moving headlong through space toward the head of the oncoming comet. The latest spectroscopic observations reveal the presence of vast quantities of poisonous gases in the coma and tail of the comet, so if the earth continues in its present course and passes into the comet's head, the result will be the swift asphyxiation of all life on this planet. It is estimated that before midnight tonight the earth will have definitely passed inside the gravitational grip of the comet, and after that it will be only a matter of hours until the end."

That night, when the giant

comet again rose in the east, it blazed in the sky like a great sea of green fire, its whirling coma filling half the heavens, its brilliant nucleus shining with an intolerable radiance. And its light fell down across a world gone mad with fear.

The shouts of men, the sobbing of women, the crying of children; the ringing of bells and screaming of whistles that heralded the terror across the earth; the chanting voices of crowds that kneeled in tearful prayer, the hoarse voices that called for them to repent; the roar of automobiles that fled north and south and east and west, in a blind effort to find escape where there was no escape; all of these sounds and ten thousand others combined to form one vast cry of utter terror that leaped from the world as from a single voice.

But as the inexorable hours marched on, and the sea of fire above grew greater and greater, nearer and nearer, a strange stillness seized the world. The mad shouting and the mumbled prayers died away, the fear-crazed figures in the streets sank down and sprawled in an apathy of hopeless terror. It was the end. For earth, and for man, and for all the works of man, the end. Thus sunken in a lassitude of dull despair, silent as a planet peopled by the dead, the world drove on toward its doom.

AT the very moment when the Washington Observatory's fateful message was being flashed around the earth, Marlin was leaving Garnton, heading north across the lake toward the Ontario shore. And while the world writhed beneath the panic caused by that message, he remained entirely ignorant of it. During the two days which he had spent at Garnton, he had read Lorrow's first dispatches regarding the earth's sudden speeding up, but in common with most of the world, had paid them but little attention. When he left the village that morning, nothing was further from his mind.

It was in a small fishing-cruiser that he left, a dilapidated, noisy-motored little boat whose aroma strongly proclaimed its calling. By chance Marlin had discovered that the boat's owner, a tall, silent and weather-beaten fisherman, intended to cross the lake at dawn that morning, and had prevailed upon him to take a passenger. So when the little craft headed out from shore at sunrise, Marlin sat at its bow, gazing into the gray banks of fog that spread over the surface of the lake.

Steadily the cruiser chugged onward, through lifting veils of mist. By the time the fog cleared, the land behind had dwindled to a thin, purple line. Then that too had vanished, so that they

seemed to move upon a boundless waste of waters.

The sun, lifting higher in the east, flooded the world with its golden light, and as they forged onward, Marlin whistled cheerfully. The world seemed to him just then an extravagantly bright and friendly place.

For two hours the little boat crept north across the sunlit waters, and must have traversed at least half of the lake's width, Marlin estimated, when an island swung up above the horizon ahead, a black spot that grew swiftly into a low, dark mass as they moved on toward it. Marlin eyed it with lively curiosity, and then turned toward his tactiturn companion at the helm.

"What island's that?" he asked, jerking a thumb toward it.

The steersman peered ahead for a moment with keen eyes, and then turned back to Marlin.

"That'll be Logan Island," he told him. "Don't pass it very often."

"Wild-lookin' place," commented his passenger. "Anybody live there?"

The other pursed his lips and shook his head. "Not that I ever heard of. There's lots of little islands like that scattered around this end of the lake, with nobody on 'em."

They were swinging closer to the island by then, passing it at

a distance of a quarter-mile. It was a long, low mass of land, a rough oblong in shape, and some three miles in length, its greater dimension. Thick forests appeared to cover it completely, extending to the water's edge, but broken here and there along the shoreline by expanses of sandy beach. Marlin could detect no sign or sound of human presence.

It was while he stared at the place, there in the brilliant morning sunlight, that there rushed upon them—the inexplicable.

A high, thin buzzing sound struck his ears, and at the same moment a flexible, swaying rod of gray-gleaming metal thrust itself up above the trees at the island's center, rearing swiftly into the air like an uncoiling snake. At its top was a round gray ball which appeared to be slowly revolving.

Marlin's jaw dropped in sheer surprise, and he heard a startled exclamation from his companion. The rod had ceased its upward climb, and abruptly, from the ball at its top, there flashed forth a narrow, dazzling ray of white light, brilliant even in the morning sunshine. It cut slantwise down across the waters and struck the little cruiser's stern.

The next few seconds remained in Marlin's memory always as a confused moment of blind, instinctive action. As the ray

struck the boat, he saw the figure of his companion outlined for a second in living light, and then the whole rear end of the cruiser had vanished, steersman, deck and cabin being whiffed out of existence in a single instant. Immediately the deck beneath Marlin's feet tilted sharply, and he felt himself catapulted into the lake. The cold waters swirled around him, over him, as he sank beneath the surface. He struggled frantically for a moment, and then was shooting up again, his head popping up into the open air.

A few pieces of floating wreckage were all that remained of the cruiser. Hiding his head as much as possible behind one of these, he peered toward the island. The ray had ceased, and he glimpsed the high, swaying rod sinking down again behind the tree-tops. In a moment the buzzing sound ceased also.

Marlin swallowed hard, and his pounding heart quieted a little. He listened tensely but could hear no further sound from the island. There was only the washing of the waters around him, and the continual whisper of the wind. Then, slowly and fearfully, he began to paddle toward the island, still clinging to his piece of wreckage, and hiding as much as possible behind it.

For a time that seemed hours to his dazed brain, he crept

across the waters toward the island, heading for its northern end. The sun blazed down upon him with ever-increasing heat as he struggled on, and the mass of land ahead seemed remote and mirage-like. Twice he heard sounds from the island's center, sharp, rattling sounds, and each time he cowered down in sudden fear and then crept on again. When at last he pulled himself from the water, he stumbled across a narrow beach and into the forest, flinging himself into a thicket of underbrush and lying there in a stupor of exhaustion.

For minutes he lay thus, breathing in great sobs, and then was abruptly roused by the realization that something was tugging at his shoulder. He sat up quickly, and instantly felt himself gripped from behind, while a strong hand clamped across his mouth and smothered the instinctive exclamation which he had been on the point of uttering. A voice sounded in his ear, low and tense.

"Quiet!" it rasped.

For a space of seconds he lay motionless, held by his unseen companion. He heard the distant rattling sounds again, murmuring faintly through the forest from the south. Suddenly they ceased. Then the grip around him relaxed, and he turned to face the one who had held him.

Crouched beside him was a hatless and coatless young man of twenty-five or twenty-six, his clothing stained and torn, his hair dishevelled. He gazed into Marlin's face with quick, bright eyes, and when he spoke it was in a whisper.

"You were one of the men in the boat," he said, gesturing toward the lake. "I saw—from the shore."

"What was it?" whispered Marlin. "My God, man, what's on this island? That ray—"

The other raised a hand in quick warning, and for a moment they were tensely silent. Again came that far rattling and clanging, hardly to be heard, dying away in a few seconds. Marlin's companion was speaking again.

"Have you any weapon?" he asked. "A pistol—" but Marlin shook his head. Abruptly the other agonized.

"No weapons!" he whispered hoarsely, "only our bare hands. And they—"

Marlin caught his arm. "For God's sake, what's going on here?" he asked. "Who are *they*?"

The other gripped himself, and then spoke in level tones. "I will explain," he said dully, passing his hands wearily over his eyes. "I need your help—God knows I need more help than yours!—but first—"

He gazed somberly into the

forest for minutes before speaking again.

"Coburn's my name, Walter Coburn. I'm an entomologist—a bug-chaser—working out of the Person Museum, in New York. You've heard of it? Well, I've been there three years, ever since I got my degree. Not much salary to it, but the work is interesting enough. It was with that work partly in mind that I came to this island.

"You know, or you may not know, that some of these little islands have an extraordinary profusion of insect-life. I was on the track of an hitherto unclassified wood-tick, and had an idea that it might be found on some such island as this. So when Hanley suggested that we spend our vacation camping here, I jumped at the chance.

"Hanley was the closest friend I had. We were about the same age, and had got acquainted at the university, where we took many of the same courses. We shared a small apartment in New York, where he had been grubbing along teaching biology in a preparatory-school, and as we couldn't spend much on our vacation, he had conceived the idea of camping on one of these islands for a couple of months. He knew about them from having cruised over the lake with a friend, some years before, and as lots of the islets were uninhabited, they

would make ideal camping-places. It would be a little lonely, but far better than a hot little apartment in New York, so he put it up to me and we decided to try it.

IT was this particular island—Logan Island, they call it—which he had in mind. We came to Cleveland, bought some second-hand camping equipment and some supplies, and loaded the whole outfit into a leaky old tub of a motor-boat which we had rented for the next few months. Then we headed out to the island.

"We got here all right, and spent a day exploring the place. Back from the shore, at the island's center, we found a little green plateau, slightly raised above the rest of the island, which was quite bare and treeless and on the edge of which stood an old log-cabin. The cabin was in pretty good shape, except for a leaky roof, so we decided to stay in it, and spread our tent over the roof as an additional protection. It took us only a day to clean the place up and install our simple outfit, and then we were all fixed. That was just three weeks ago.

"In the days that followed, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, fishing, swimming or just loafing. Now and then I beat around the island in search of the elusive wood-tick, and every few days we

went over to the mainland, so it wasn't as lonely as we'd expected. After three years of New York, the quietness of the place was soothing. And then, twelve days after our first coming to the island, the lightning struck.

"The thing was like a bolt from a clear sky. On that particular night Hanley and I were sitting up late, smoking and discussing the new green comet, which was getting nearer and was beginning to fill the newspapers with astronomical articles. Sprawled out in front of the cabin, and looking up into the star-scattered heavens, we were talking of the comet when Hanley suddenly stopped short in the middle of a sentence and jumped to his feet. He turned to me with a queer expression on his face. 'Do you hear it?' he asked.

"I listened, but could hear no unusual sounds, and then, in a moment, I got it too. It was a deep, powerful droning sound, something like the whirring of a great machine, and it seemed to come from directly over our heads. Every moment it was getting louder, nearer.

"I turned to Hanley. 'A plane?' I suggested, but he shook his head, listening with frowning interest. I knew that he was right, for the sound was unlike that of any airplane-motor, but what it was I could not guess. Then I saw, almost directly above us, a

little circle of blackness, a round black circle that hid the stars behind it, and that was *growing*.

"It was growing very swiftly, expanding out and obscuring star after star, and the droning sound was becoming terrific. Had it not been for that sound, I would have thought the thing a balloon or parachute coming down toward us, but it was clearly not that. Whatever it was, it was descending toward us with very great speed, and as it continued to do so, a vague, instinctive fear shot through me. I stepped back, hastily, toward the cabin. Then I heard an exclamation from Hanley, and turned around again, just in time to see the thing itself descending upon the plateau.

"It was a cone, a gigantic cone of smooth metal, which shot swiftly down and came to rest on its great base without a jar, its apex still pointing skyward. It must have been fifty feet in height, from base to apex, and its sides were smooth and unbroken by any opening. The great droning sound had suddenly ceased.

"Hanley took a quick step toward the thing, his face alight with interest. I shouted to him to come back, and ran toward him. Then the whole scene was cut short in a fraction of a second. There was a click from the side of the great cone, and a flash of intense white light leapt

toward us. It struck me with stunning force, like a blow from a great club, and all went black before me.

"When I came back to consciousness, my head was still aching from that blow, and bright morning sunlight was falling on my face. My first glance around showed me that I was lying on the floor of the cabin, and Hanley lay beside me, still unconscious. And in a moment I discovered that we were both shackled to the cabin-wall, by means of short metal chains and metal anklets that were fitted around our right legs.

"From the plateau outside, there came to my ears sounds of prolonged activity, hammering and tapping and clanging, with now and then a loud hissing as of some escaping force. For the moment, though, I paid no attention to them, bending my energies toward reviving my friend. After a few crude restorative measures on my part, he opened his eyes, and with my help, sat up. His eyes widened as they took in the chains that bound us to the wall, and as the enigmatic sounds from outside came to his ears. He turned back to me and for a moment we crouched there and stared at each other, a little wildly, I think. Then, before we could speak, the cabin-door swung suddenly open, admitting a single figure.

"We turned our eyes toward that figure, and then gasped. For the thing that stood framed in the open doorway was so grotesque, so incredible, that for a moment I felt myself in the depths of some hideous nightmare. I heard Hanley whisper, 'God!'"

"Imagine a man whose body, or trunk, is of smooth black metal instead of flesh, just a round, thick cylinder of glossy metal, whose two legs have been replaced by four spider-like metal limbs, and whose two arms have been supplanted by four twisting metal tentacles, like those of an octopus. This creature was like that, not much exceeding the average man's height, and instead of a head there was set on top of its cylindrical body, a small square box, or cube, which it could turn at will in any direction. Inset on each of this cube's four sides was a single circle of soft glowing white light.

"My first thought was that the thing was an intricate machine of some sort, but its quick, intelligent movements soon disproved that theory. A swift tentacle whipped up from it as it stood there, and closed the door behind it. It poised for a moment, seeming to contemplate us, and then came closer, gliding smoothly toward us on its spider-like limbs. It halted a few feet away; seemed to be examining us.

"I shrank back in utter fear,

yet I could not take my eyes from the thing. It was, I saw then, entirely metallic. A vague notion that this was some living creature armored in metal was driven from my mind when I saw that there was no trace of flesh, or even clothing, about it. I noted, too, that one tentacle held a dagger-like object which I guessed to be a weapon of some sort.

"For only a moment the thing stood there, but in that moment I sensed that the strange glowing circles in the head were eyes of some sort, and that they were regarding us intently. Then, silent as ever, the thing glided back and out of the cabin, closing the door behind it. And again we faced each other in the silent little room.

"It was Hanley who broke the silence first. 'They've got us,' he said dully. 'That thing—'

"'But what was it?' I asked him desperately. 'Metal—and yet moving—like that.'

"'God knows,' he answered. 'It was alive, and intelligent, I think. A high order of intelligence, too. That cone—the ray that stunned us—' He was talking more to himself than to me. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and stepped over to the window, dragging the short chain with him. He gazed out of the dirty, cracked glass in the opening, and watching, I saw something of astonishment and fear fall upon his face.

"In a moment I was by his side, peering out also. Before me lay the sunlit, green plateau, a scene of incredible activity. The first thing which I glimpsed was a row of four metal cones, similar to the one we had already seen, which rested on their bases at the further edge of the clearing. Wide sections in their sides had swung aside, however, and in and out of the cones and across the plateau were swarming dozens of grotesque, metallic figures like the one which had already visited us in the cabin. All seemed the same, in appearance, and except for a few who appeared to direct and watch the efforts of the others, all were busy at some task or another.

"Some were removing masses of tools and small machines from the cones, while others were busy assembling and testing other mechanisms, in the open clearing. We glimpsed machines and tools, the purposes of which we could not guess. What struck me most was that all of these hundred or more figures in the clearing worked in utter silence. There was no speech of any sort between them, and except for an occasional changing of tools, or a buzzing and hissing of machines, their work was quite noiseless. Yet each went about his particular task without the slightest confusion.

"For perhaps a half-hour we

watched the things, whose activities never ceased, and only left the window when we saw three of their number approaching the cabin. We stepped away from the wall at once; in a moment the door swung open and the three entered.

"They were of the same appearance as the one who had first visited us; indeed, he may have been of these three, for there was no distinguishing one from another. They came toward us, and I saw that one was holding a small, square tablet of smooth white material like stone, and a long metal pencil in a tentacle. The other two carried the dagger-like weapons which we had already seen.

"The one with the tablet came closer and held the tablet up to our view, then began to sketch swiftly upon it with the pencil. 'Evidently trying to communicate with us,' muttered Hanley, and I nodded. In a moment the sketching ceased, and the creature held up the tablet for us to see. On it he had drawn a number of circles, one very large circle being at the center, while around it and at various distances from it were placed other circles of differing size, but all much smaller than the central one. With the pencil, the sketcher pointed to the central circle and then up through the open door. We stared at him blankly, and he repeated the ges-

ture. Suddenly Hanley understood.

"The sun!" he exclaimed. 'He means the sun, Coburn. He's drawn a diagram of the solar system.'

"To show our comprehension, Hanley pointed also to the central circle on the tablet, and then up toward the sun. Satisfied that we understood, the creature then pointed to one of the smaller circles, the third in distance from the central one, and then pointed to us. This time his meaning was clear enough. He was indicating earth on the diagram, and pointing to us as if to say that we were earth-men, and that this was earth. Again Hanley repeated his gesture, to show our understanding, and then the thing began to draw again on the tablet. In a moment he held it up for us to see.

"He had drawn a curious little design on the white surface, some distance away from the central suncircle. It was a large circle, from which there streamed backward a number of long, straight lines. He held it for us to see, then pointed first to the new design and then to himself and his two companions. For a moment we did not understand, and then an exclamation broke from Hanley.

"The comet!" he cried. 'He's drawn the comet—he means that they are from the comet!'

"Something of awe fell upon us

as we looked at the creature. He pointed again to the comet-sign on the tablet, then toward the four cones on the plateau, and then to himself again. With that, the three turned from us and glided out of the cabin, again fastening the door behind them. The meaning of that last gesture had been clear enough to us. The things had come from the comet to earth, in those four great cones. But *why*?

FOR hours we discussed the thing, while from outside came the clanking and hissing of the invaders' enigmatic machines. Why had they come to earth? It was plain that this was no invading party for however advanced their science, a hundred of them could not conquer and hold a world. Yet why, then, had they come? We knew that the comet was at that time racing around the sun, and that it would come close to the earth on its way out of the solar system. Could it be that they were establishing a base on the island, so that when the comet came closer, the others on it could pour down on earth? It was possible. But why had they spared us, and kept us prisoners, instead of killing us? And above all, what *were* these comet-people? Living, intelligent, yet with bodies and limbs of metal?

"For all the rest of that day we lay in the cabin, discussing those

questions in awed whispers, returning now and then to the window for further glimpses of the activities outside. We saw that escape was impossible, for the shackles and chains that bound us were strong and tightly fastened to the wall-logs, while every weapon and tool of any sort had been removed from the cabin before we regained consciousness. Even if we had been unfettered, there would have been no chance for escape, for all around the cabin there swarmed the metal figures, their activity never ceasing.

"The day waned, and when night came, the invaders set into action great flood-lights from the cones, which lit up the whole plateau like day. And beneath this light they went on working. I could not see a single one who stopped to rest. Always they labored, and beneath their swift tentacle-arms there grew up a great, half-formed machine of some sort, the foundation of which was already finished. Dully, I wondered what its purpose might be.

"A day passed—another—while we remained prisoners in the cabin. We had been left our own food, and water was brought to us, but we were not permitted to leave the cabin. Gradually we lost interest in the activities of the creatures outside, who went on with their building and test-

ing and assembling almost unobserved by us. Then, on the afternoon of the second day, there came to us again one with a tablet and pencil, who gave us to understand, by various signs, that he wished to learn our written language. We agreed to teach him, and within an incredibly short time, he had mastered the reading and writing of English. We would point to an object and write down its name, and so on until his vocabulary was complete. His memory must have been almost perfect, for he could look at a word once and use it thereafter without hesitation. Within two days he could converse with us at ease, through the writing tablet. And it was then that we learned, from him, the purpose of their invasion.

"As we had guessed, they came from the great comet which was sweeping through the solar system. At the nucleus of that comet, we learned, there was a solid core formed eons ago by long accumulations of meteoric material. There was air and water upon that core, though little of either, and it was lighted by the intrinsic light of the surrounding coma, and heated more or less by electrical radiation also from the coma. The vast clouds of deadly gases in the comet's tail and head did not touch the solid core, and on that core life had sprung up. That was but natural, given a set-

ting fit for the propagation of life. The theory of Arrhenius, according to which life-spores constantly traverse the universe and evolve into living creatures on whatever planet they strike, applies equally well to the comet's solid core. The life-spores had fallen there, also, and had grown through ages of evolutionary change into a race of intelligent active creatures. They were not men, not human in form, but their science was more than human.

"They devoted this superhuman scientific knowledge of theirs to the task of making life easier on their own comet-world. Every living thing must have food in order to live, and it was hard to produce food of any kind on the barren core of the comet. And this set their scientists to thinking. For a long time these comet-people had depended more and more on machines to do their work, and less and less on their own bodily strength. It is the same with the races of man today, who are beginning to forsake manual labor for machine labor. On the comet that process was very far advanced. Machines performed every needed action for its inhabitants, and they rarely made use of their own strength. It is not hard to understand what finally happened.

"They began to say to themselves in effect—'It is our brain,

our intelligence, that is the vital part of us; we would be rid of this handicap of the body forever.'

"With this idea in mind, their scientists worked together and finally produced a body of metal, a body-machine which was driven by atomic force, like all of their machines, and which needed only the slight, occasional care which is given to any machine. Inside that body had been arranged an electrical nerve-system, the controls of which led up into the square metal head. In that head, also, had been placed a small super-radio by which silent, constant communication could be had from metal body to metal body. Nerves, sense-organs, muscles, they were all there, and all were artificial, inorganic. The metal body lacked only a brain.

"It was then that one of their scientists performed his greatest achievement, and brought success to their plan. From the living body of one of their number he removed the living brain, as their consummate art in super-surgery enabled him to do. This living brain was then placed within a specially-prepared brain chamber of a metal body, inside its cubical head.

"Of course you know that the human brain is fed from the blood stream of the human body. To replace this, they placed the brain in a special solution, having all the properties of nourish-

ing the brain cells. This solution is usually renewed once a week, so it is always fresh, and therefore the brain never really ages.

"Elaborate precautions are taken that no germs shall ever enter the brain chamber, as it was soon found that results were disastrous, wherever sufficient care had not been exercised.

"The brain chamber is formed of a platinum-like metal, which never oxidizes, and lasts practically forever, unless damaged by blows or other unusual accidents.

"When the brain is finally placed in its platinum chamber, the surgeon carefully connects the nerve ends of the brains with the electrical nerve connections of the metal body. Then an apparent miracle is accomplished. The body lives, can move, and can walk. The brain or intelligence of the one who had gone under the knife is now actuating the lifeless metal frame, directing it and controlling it. And that intelligence is now forever free from the demands of its former body of flesh, residing as it does now in the untiring metal body which requires neither food nor sleep.

"The experiment was thus a complete success, and at once it was duplicated on a big scale. Within a short time every living being on the comet-world had been treated likewise, so that his brain reposed in a similar body of metal. And so, for ages, the

comet-people lived, undying brains cased in bodies of metal. When a body was worn out, it was a simple matter to remove the brain from it and place it in a new body. Thus they had achieved immortality. Ages rolled on while their strange world drove across the heavens, and flashed from star to star.

"At last, though, there came a time when the world of the comet-people seemed threatened with downfall. Their metal bodies, like all of their machines, were actuated by atomic force, force produced through the accelerated disintegration of certain radioactive elements. As time went on, however, their supply of these elements became smaller and smaller. It became plain that within a short time, as they measured time, they were doomed to extinction, for without the force to run their machines and bodies, those bodies must become inert and useless, and the brain inside of each must die. It would take long, but it would be sure, and in the end they would all be gone. They must find new sources of such elements, or die.

"In this extremity, their astronomers made an important announcement. They had charted the course which their comet-world was following, and had discovered that soon it would pass through a star-system with eight planets.* On its way through this

system, they stated, the comet would pass close to one of these planets, the one which is our earth. Their spectroscopic instruments assured them that this planet, earth, held great stores of the radio-active elements they needed, so they conceived the gigantic plan of stealing earth from the solar system, of drawing it into the comet and carrying it out into space with them. If they could do this, it would furnish them an endless supply of the materials they needed, and would also give them new lands inside the comet. So they set to work and formulated their great conspiracy. A conspiracy to steal a world!

WHEN the comet had entered the solar system, a hundred of the comet-people set out in four great cones, or space-ships, to establish themselves upon earth and carry out their plan. These cones were driven through space by light-pressure, the possibilities of which force they had long utilized. Even on earth, we know that this force exists and understand a few of its manifestations; though only a few. We know that it is the pressure of the sun's light that causes a comet's tail to swing always away from the sun. It drove their cones through space at will. The same principle is

used in their destroying white ray. In that ray, light-pressure could be used of such power as to disintegrate the molecules of any object, or it could be used merely to strike a powerful blow, as when Hanley and I had been stunned by it. By means of this force the cones of the comet-people rose from their world and drove headlong out through the great coma, across the solar system to the earth.

"They knew earth was inhabited and planned, on reaching the planet, to find some secluded spot where they could work without fear of interruption. For this reason they had approached earth at night, finally landing upon the dark silent island. Surprised there by the presence of Hanley and myself, they had instantly stunned us with the light-ray, but had refrained from killing us for their own reasons. They wished to learn as much as possible about our world, and for that reason had spared us and had taken the trouble to get into communication with us.

"It was thus that we learned the method which they intended to use in pulling our planet into the passing comet. You know that the earth, whirling around the sun, is exactly like a hand swinging a ball around and around at the end of a long cord. The sun is the hand, the earth is the ball, and the power of the

*Note: Pluto, the ninth planet in the solar system, was not discovered until 1930, two years after this story first appeared.

—Editor.

sun's gravitation is the cord. If it were not for the earth's motion, its centrifugal force, it would fall into the sun, pulled there by the latter's gravitational power. And similarly, if it were not for the pull of the sun's gravity, the earth's centrifugal force would cause it to fly off into space at a tangent, just as the swinging ball would fly off if someone suddenly cut the cord.

"That was just what the comet-people meant to do. They meant to cut the cord. They were setting up an apparatus that would neutralize the sun's gravitational power on the earth. They had learned that the emanations of gravitational force from any body have a measurable wave-length, and that this wavelength is different in the case of each different body. The vibrations of gravitational force from the sun are thus different in wave-length from those of earth, and it is the same always; the wave-lengths of no two emanations are the same. Thus the invaders could neutralize the sun's gravitational power on earth without affecting the power of the earth itself, or of any other body. They would set up a wave-plant, or vibration machine, to send out vibrations equal in wave-length to the sun's gravitational emanations; these would meet and oppose and neutralize the gravitational force of the sun. In that way, the sun

would no longer pull earth, and the earth, therefore, would fly off into space at a tangent.

"It was the plan of the invaders to do this at a time when the comet was nearing the earth, so that when the planet did fly off from its orbit, it would do so just as the comet was passing, and would thus be brought inside the gravitational grip of the great comet itself. That done, the rest would be easy. The grip of the comet would pull the earth down through the coma to the nucleus, where it would be received so as to cause it to revolve about the nucleus. Of course the earth's moon would accompany its mother-planet when it left its orbit, and would be carried into the comet likewise. All life on earth would be annihilated when it passed through the coma by the dense and deadly gases there, and thus earth and moon would be at the disposal of the comet-people. And thus the earth would be carried out of the solar system inside the great comet for all time, and its riches of minerals and materials would form a great supply base for the comet-people, and another world for them to inhabit.

"This much Hanley and I learned in our written conversations with the leader of the invaders, for it was the leader, we learned, who was communicating with us. And we were dazed with horror. Soon the invaders would

have finished that great machine by which they meant to cut off the sun's pull, and when the comet drew near earth, the planet would go hurtling out toward its doom. We alone knew the peril that hung over earth, and we could do nothing, fettered and imprisoned as we were. Nor was there chance of outside help, for the invaders kept a close watch on the waters around the island, and twice used the light-ray to annihilate small boats that came too near. There was no chance for escape or for help from outside, and we must remain helpless witnesses of the world's doom.

"It was then that the leader revealed to us the purpose for which we had been saved, and made to us an amazing proposal, which filled me with horror. He proposed that we cast in our lot with the comet-people, become one of them and help them in their plans. He had learned that we were both scientists, and knew that after the earth had been drawn into the comet, we would be of invaluable aid in helping them exploit its resources. So he informed us that if we would do so, if we would agree to help them, he would confer immortality on us by removing our brains from our own bodies and placing them in metal bodies like their own. If we refused—death.

"The thought filled me with loathing—the idea of our living

brains enduring through centuries in metal bodies. We had been given a few days in which to decide, and as I knew that I would never accept, I saw death ahead. But to my horror and dismay, Hanley began to lean toward the idea. As a biologist, I think, he had long been interested in the idea of achieving immortality, of preserving the intelligence beyond the death of the body, and now that he saw the thing within his grasp, he was disposed to accept it. I argued with him for hours, trying to make him feel the utter horror of the whole business, invoking every argument I could think of to shake him, but all to no purpose, for he was sullen and unyielding to all my words. He pointed out that we would die in any case, and that the peoples of earth were doomed, so that our refusal would in no way help us or anyone else. So to all of my entreaties he turned a deaf ear, and when the time came, he informed the leader of the invaders that he was willing to accept their proposition and become one of them.

"That afternoon they did the thing. God, what a sight that was! Through the window I watched them. Nearby they set up a folding metal table on the plateau, and stretched Hanley upon it, then they applied their anesthetics. Close by lay the metal body which they had prepared for

him. It was the same as their own, except for one feature. Instead of four tentacle-arms and four legs, it had only two of each. That puzzled me for a time, but it occurred to me that this was so because there were no nerve-ends in Hanley's brain with which to control an extra pair of arms and legs. Therefore, his metal body had been provided with just two of each.

"I saw their instruments, then flashing in the sunlight, and when the moment came, they lifted Hanley's living brain from his skull and placed it in that metal frame, inside the cubical head. A flash of the light-ray, and his own dead body vanished, while the invaders clustered around the metal body, twisting, turning, connecting.

"At last they stepped back, and a sick horror came over me as I saw that metal body standing erect, moving, walking, obeying the commands of Hanley's brain, inside it.

"From that time on, Hanley was one of the comet-people. Like them, he worked unceasingly on the great machine, directed by the leader, no doubt, and like them, he never seemed to rest, his brain ever driving that tireless metal body. He paid no attention whatever to me, never came near the cabin. He may have been ordered to stay away from it, of course. But I could al-

ways distinguish him from the other metal figures, even at a distance, because of the difference in the number of his limbs.

"I had expected death when they finished with Hanley, but I soon learned that a fate far worse lay ahead. The leader visited me once more, and told me, out of sheer cruelty, I think, that when their work on earth was finished, they would take me back with them. Living creatures were very rare on their own world, except for themselves, and I would be a valuable subject for experimentation. Even that news hardly altered the dull despair that filled me.

"The days dragged by slowly, and the great machine outside neared completion. It looked much like a battery of great turbines, a long row of dark, squat cylindrical mechanisms which were joined to each other by an intricate web of connections. Over all of them had been placed a great cover of shining metal, protecting the mechanisms beneath from rain and dew, and inset on the front of this cover was the switchboard which controlled the great machine. It was a square tablet of black metal, covered by a mass of intricate adjustments and controls, switches, knobs and levers. At the center was a single shining lever much larger than the others, which swung around a graduated dial.

"At the very edge of the plateau, not far from the cabin, the invaders had erected another mechanism, which puzzled me for a time. It was a large upright screen of ground-glass, or a similar material, behind which was attached some smaller mechanisms, which I only glimpsed. This screen was, in fact, a great chart, a chart of the heavens, on which was represented the comet and the earth. The comet was a great disk of green light, and around this central disk was a thin green circle, which represented the limits of the comet's gravitational grip. Any object inside that thin green line was inside the comet's grasp, and would inevitably be drawn down into the coma, while so long as it lay outside of that line, it was in the power of the sun's gravity. In other words, that line was the "neutral" between the two zones of gravitational force.

"The earth was represented on the chart by a small disk of white light. Both the tiny white disk and the great green one moved on the screen in exact proportions to the movements of the earth and comet in the heavens. How this was accomplished I could not conjecture, but supposed that the mechanism behind the screen caught a moving picture of the actual movements of comet and earth, by means of light-rays or electrical radiations,

and reproduced it in miniature on the screen. The purpose of the chart was clear enough. It would enable them to time their operations with accuracy, so that the earth would leave its orbit at the exact moment when its outward flight would bring it inside of that thin green line, and within the comet's gravitational power. Tensely I watched that chart, and each day I saw the comet and the earth drawing nearer, nearer, as the green wanderer sped out of the solar system.

BY then the work of the invaders was slackening, for the great machine appeared to be finished. At last came the time, just four nights ago, when they finally put it into operation. I saw them gathered around the switchboard, Hanley among them. The leader stood ready, a tentacle grasping the large central lever. Others were watching the great chart, calculating the positions of earth and comet. I knew that the whole operation must be timed to an incredible nicety, if it were to succeed at all, and I waited, as anxiously as they. At last, there was a sudden stir among those at the chart, and I divined that the signal had been given, speeding silently and swiftly from brain to brain. And I was right, for at the same moment the leader, at the switchboard, swung the big lever around the

dial, slowly and carefully. He had reason to be careful. The difference in wave-length of the different gravitational emanations must be extremely minute, and if he had accidentally neutralized the earth's gravity instead of the sun's, if only for an instant, there is no telling what tremendous cataclysm might not have occurred. But that did not happen, for when he had swung the lever to a certain position on the dial, there rose from the great machine a low humming, a sound so deep as to be scarcely audible. Instantly the leader stepped back.

"The machine had been started. I knew that at that moment it was sending forth its own powerful vibrations to meet and oppose and neutralize those of the sun's gravitational force. The cord had been cut!

"For a time, though, nothing seemed changed. Like the metal figures on the plateau, I watched the great chart for all the rest of that night, but it was only toward morning that any change became apparent. Even that change was so small that it could hardly be noted. It was only that the little white earth-circle on the chart was moving a little faster, was leaping toward the green comet a little more quickly.

"And as the hours went by, it moved faster and faster, until by that night I could see plainly that the earth was already a little out

of its orbit, veering out a little bit toward the nearing comet. Gathered around the chart and the great vibration-mechanism, the invaders watched the result of their work. And fettered there in the little cabin I, too, watched and waited.

"But that night, when I had all but reached the blackest depths of despair, I stumbled on something that gave me a ray of hope. Much of the time I spent in the cabin I occupied myself in searching endlessly for some sort of tool or weapon, but always without avail, for as I have said, every object that would serve for either had been taken away. But at last, that night, I came across a tiny point of metal that projected a bit from the dirt floor of the cabin, in one of the dark corners. In a moment I was digging away at the thing, and inside a minute had unearthed a long, rusty file, which had been buried beneath the floor, with only the tip projecting through the dirt. It was so badly rusted that it appeared almost useless, but the very possession of the thing gave me new life, and after cleaning it as well as I could, I set to work on the shackle around my leg, muffling the grate of the file by wrapping it with cloths when I worked.

"All through that night I sawed away at the shackle, and when morning came I was disheartened by the little I had ac-

complished. The rusty file had made only a shallow notch in the hard metal of the shackle. Yet, I knew that it was my only chance, and kept steadily at it, now and then glancing out of the window to make sure that I was unobserved.

"Weariness overcame me, and I slept for several hours, waking shortly after noon. That was yesterday. And when I glanced out of the window at the great chart, I saw that earth had travelled half the distance between itself and the comet, and was approaching perilously near to the thin green line that marked the limits of the comet's grip. I knew that once it passed inside that line it was the end, for no power in the universe could then release it from the comet. The machine must be smashed or turned off before that happened. Frantically I worked at the shackle, through all of that long, hot afternoon.

"Night came, and the comet flared overhead in awful splendor, waxing tremendously in size and brilliance, its green light falling through my window and clashing with the white brilliance of the floodlights on the plateau. Out on that plateau, the invaders were still gathered in motionless groups, still watching the tiny earth-circle on the chart, which hurtled toward the comet now with terrifying speed. From its

rate of progress I estimated that it would have passed inside the comet's grip by the next night and knew that after it had done so, the invaders would enter their cones and leave for their own world at the comet's center, while earth passed to its doom in the deadly coma. I must escape that night, if ever.

"At last, shortly before midnight, I had sawed the shackle half through, and with a muffled blow, managed to break it. I crept to the window, then, and cautiously looked out.

"Under the dazzling lights, the metal figures outside were gathered together in two masses, around the chart and the machine, sprawled on the ground. None of them seemed to be watching the cabin at the moment, but the little building had only two windows, and both of them faced toward the plateau. The forest lay only a few yards behind the cabin, and once inside it I would be comparatively safe, but to get there I must creep from the building in full view of the invaders on the plateau, and beneath the dazzling glare of their flood-lights.

"There was no other course for me to follow, though, so without hesitating further, I gently pried the window open and as quietly as possible slid through it, dropping at once to the ground and lying still for a tense mo-

ment. There were no sudden sounds or movements from the metal figures around the two mechanisms, so as stealthily as possible I began to crawl around the base of the cabin, and in a few moments had reached the welcome shadows behind it. I then rose to my feet, and took a swift step toward the forest, a few yards away. And I stopped short. Fifty feet to the right of me a single metal figure had suddenly stepped into view, confronting me, a light-ray tube held in its tentacle and pointing toward me. And it was Hanley!

"Hanley, or what had once been Hanley's brain and soul, cased in that body of metal. I recognized him at once, by reason of his two tentacles and limbs, and the bitterness of death came over me, for I had failed. Instinctively, though, even at that moment, I staggered toward the trees ahead, waiting for the death from behind. In a moment the ray would flash, then death.

"But it did not come! With a sudden thrill of hope I began to run, and within a few seconds had passed into the dense darkness of the forest. I had escaped, though for the moment I could hardly credit my escape. I glanced back toward the plateau, and saw the figure of Hanley still standing there, silent, unmoving, the deadly ray-tube still held in his grasp. He had let me go!

BEFORE I could understand what had happened, there came a sudden flurry of movement across the plateau, a little stir of excitement there, and over my shoulder, I saw a dozen or so dark shapes gliding smoothly across the clearing on my track. They had discovered my escape, and were after me.

"Frantic as some hunted creature of the wild, I raced through the forest, stumbling on projecting roots, hurling myself through patches of briars with mad haste. And swift on my trail came that inexorable pursuit, drawing nearer and nearer toward me, turn and twist as I might. I was soon out of breath and knew I could not long compete in speed or endurance with the tireless metal bodies behind me. At last I saw the ripple of water ahead, and a plan, a last expedient, flashed into my mind.

"I stumbled on until I had reached the water's edge, where the thick forest extended right down to the island's shore. Swiftly I searched the ground around me, and in a moment had found what I needed—a large, thick section of deadwood. Grasping this, I threw myself behind a clump of bushes a few yards away, and waited for my pursuers.

"In a few seconds they came, crashing through the underbrush on my track. I waited a moment longer, until they had al-

most reached me, then hurled my section of wood out into the water, and at once flattened myself again behind my screen of bushes.

"The piece of wood splashed into the water at the exact moment when my pursuers, some five or six in number, reached the water's edge, not ten feet away from me. At the sound of the splash, the brilliant light-ray instantly flashed forth from their weapons, churning the waters of the lake with its disintegrating force. For perhaps a minute this continued, and then they snapped off the ray and waited. There was silence, except for the washing of the troubled waters.

"I crouched lower behind my flimsy shelter, holding my breath, but after a long moment the metal figures turned away, and I heard them retracing their way through the forest. My trick had worked.

"For half an hour I lay there, a little dazed by the swift action I had just passed through. Then I rose and began to make my way stealthily along the shore. It was my thought to get to our little motorboat, which we had kept in a tiny cove, and to make for the mainland in it. If I could do that, I might be able to obtain help and return to the island, make an effort to destroy these invaders and smash their machine. But when I got to the cove I found only a few

fragments of the boat. It had been destroyed by the invaders!

"To me, that seemed the end—the end, to all our earth. There was no chance left to give warning now, for I knew that by the next night earth would have passed inside the comet's grip forever, and it would all be over. Through the rest of the night, our last night, I wandered over the island, a little mad, I think, and when this morning finally came it found me at the island's northern end. I lay there, trying to plan some last course of action, when the chugging of a boat roused me. I hurried to the shore, just in time to see your boat destroyed by the light-ray from the plateau, and your companion killed. I saw that you had escaped—though the watchers did not—and waited until you got to shore. And that is all.

"And that is all. Over there on the plateau stands the great machine which is sending earth hurtling into the comet, while the invaders there watch and wait. A little longer, a little nearer, and earth will have passed inside the comet's grip, and then it will be hours only until the end. The comet overhead growing larger and larger, nearer and nearer, and then the deadly gases of the coma, bringing swift death to all on earth. And at the last, the comet racing out of the solar system with the earth inside it,

flashing out into space, never to return, plunging across the universe for all time with its stolen, captive world!"

THE hoarse whisper of Coburn's voice ceased, and for minutes the two men sat in silence. The whole island seemed unutterably silent, at that moment, except for the wind gently rustling the leaves around them, and the drowsy hum of insects. Through the foliage above, the sunlight slanted down in bars of bright gold.

Marlin was the first to speak. "The earth!" he whispered chokingly; "The whole earth! What can we do—we two—"

Coburn was staring into the forest, scarcely listening. When he spoke, his voice was deadened, toneless. "Nothing, now," he said. "We must wait—until tonight—" A little flame of hope leaped into his eyes, and he turned quickly to Marlin.

"Tonight there is a chance," he whispered. "A chance in ten million, but—a chance. If we could get to that machine—"

"Smash it?" asked Marlin. "Turn it off?"

Coburn nodded slowly. "We'll try," he said. "Tonight, when it's darker. If I had a single moment at that switchboard—"

He broke off suddenly as once more there came through the forest the clanging rattle of metal

against metal. His eyes held Marlin's. "Getting ready," he whispered. "Getting ready to leave, tonight. They'll wait till earth has passed that neutral line, until it's in the comet's grip, and then they'll destroy the machine and leave in the cones."

Crouched there, they listened, silent, white-faced, tense. . . .

Always afterward the remaining hours of the day were to Marlin a vague, half-remembered time. Hot, hungry and very thirsty, he lay beside Coburn, speaking little and that in whispers, listening fearfully to the sounds that drifted to their ears from the south. As the day waned, the events through which he had just passed, the things which he had just been told, became blurred and confused in his brain. Once or twice he caught himself wondering why he lay thus in hiding, and brought himself back to reality only with a sharp effort.

A few hours more, and the sunset flamed low in the west, painting the sky there with a riot of brilliant colors. Marlin strove to remember a sunset which he had once seen, with a great blue lake and a neat white village in the foreground. How long ago had that been? Days, months, years?

While he struggled with that thought, the gold and orange and crimson were fading from the sky above, and they awaited only the

darkening of the long June twilight. Its gray deepened to a darker gray, and then to black. Then, up from the eastern horizon, there soared colossal bars and banners of viridescent light, sweeping across the heavens like an aurora of blinding green. Prepared as he had been for the sight Marlin gasped when the comet wheeled into the heavens, a single vast ocean of green fire, that crept smoothly westward across the firmament, dripping down a ghastly, throbbing radiance upon the world. It was as if the whole sky were boiling with emerald flame.

Coburn stood up, his burning eyes fixed upon the comet, his face death-like beneath the green unearthly light. He turned to Marlin, who had risen beside him.

"I am going ahead to reconnoiter first," he explained swiftly, "and I want you to stay here while I'm gone. We have a few hours at least, I think, and before we can plan any course of action I must know what is happening on the plateau."

"You won't be long?" whispered Marlin, and the other shook his head. "Not more than a half-hour. But don't leave this spot until I come back."

Marlin whispered his assent, sinking to the ground again, while Coburn glanced quickly around, then moved stealthily into the forest, toward the south.

In a moment he had been swallowed up by the shadows.

Left alone, Marlin resumed his prone position on the ground, not venturing any movement. Except for the steady chirping of crickets, and the deep croaking of distant frogs, the forest around him was very silent. He turned, after a moment, and gazed up into the flaming heavens, until his eyes were dazzled by the splendor of the waxing comet. There came to him, dimly, some realization of what that flaming thing above must be doing to the world of men, of the pit of fear into which it must have precipitated all earth. The thought steadied him a little, and his jaw tightened.

Abruptly Marlin realized that Coburn had been gone for a longer time than he had mentioned, and swift anxiety and fear chilled him. Where was Coburn? Had he been captured? Killed? He tried to reassure himself, to force down his misgivings, but with the passing of every minute his fear deepened. When an hour had passed he rose at last to his feet, looking anxiously around. He hesitated for a moment, then uttered a low call.

"Coburn!"

No answer came back to him, except for a rustling echo of his own voice. A ray of green light from the wheeling comet overhead struck down through the canopy of restless leaves and fell

upon his white, anxious face.
"Coburn!"

Again he had called, and louder, but again his cry went unanswered. Marlin could endure the suspense no longer, and suddenly crept from his hiding place and began to make his way southward through the forest, as silently as possible.

Slowly he moved forward through the dark forest, a forest pillared here and there by shafts of green radiance from the comet overhead. He stumbled across green-lit clearings, and over tiny, gurgling brooks, and through dense thickets of brush and briars. Twice he crossed steep little ridges, and once he blundered across a soggy patch of swamp, where his feet sank deeply into the treacherous ground, and where snakes rustled away from him through the grass on either side. Still he stumbled on, breath almost gone, heart near to bursting. It seemed to him now that he must be very near to the plateau at the island's center.

But as he emerged from a dense little tangle of brush, and took in the sight ahead of him, something like a sob came from him, and he slumped to the ground in sheer exhaustion. He was standing at the edge of a narrow, sandy beach, and beyond it there stretched away the rippling, green-lit lake. Instead of heading toward the island's cen-

ter, he had lost his way, and had lost more than an hour blundering across the island in the wrong direction. He dropped to the ground, half-dazed by his efforts, striving to get his bearings.

He thought of calling to Coburn again, but dared not do so, for he could not know how close he might be to the plateau. Nor could he know where the plateau lay, there on the strange dark island. If he were to return to where Coburn had left him, then he might be able—

Clang!

It rang across the island, loud and clear, a single short, metallic note. Marlin started to his feet. He stood motionless, listening intently. In a moment came another sound, a deep, powerful droning, that waxed in intensity for a moment, then continued without change. At once Marlin moved off again into the forest, heading unhesitatingly to the left. The sound, which could come only from the plateau, had given him his bearings.

Hastily he pushed on, his weariness forgotten for the moment, his throat tight with excitement. Far ahead he made out a thin white light that filtered feebly through the forest, a pale light very different from the green radiance of the comet overhead. And as Marlin pressed on toward it, the droning sound came to his ears louder and louder, nearer

and nearer. He slackened his pace a little, moving more stealthily.

CLANG!

Again it came, that single ringing note, sounding louder in his ears than the first, as he drew nearer to the plateau. And again, following it, there rose the deep droning sound, combining with the first to fill the air with a terrific humming, as of ten thousand dynamos.

The white light ahead grew stronger and stronger, until at last there rose before Marlin a steep little slope, at the top of which the forest ended, and from beyond which came the white radiance. He flattened himself on the ground, crawled stealthily up the slope, and paused at its edge, behind a slight thicket of bushes. Cautiously he parted the bushes and peered forward.

Before him lay the plateau, a broad, grassy surface perhaps a quarter-mile across. Some fifty feet above its center there hung in the air two great shapes from which came the droning sound, two gigantic cones of metal. Attached to these were flood-lights that drenched all on the plateau with their white light, which even there was pale in comparison with the throbbing radiance from the comet overhead.

At the center of the plateau two similar cones rested on the ground, in the side of each of

which was an oval opening. Even as Marlin first glimpsed these, the opening in one of them closed, with the loud clanging note he had twice heard, and then, with a powerful droning roar, the cone rose smoothly into the air to hang beside the two others there.

On the plateau was left the single great cone. Beside it there stood a long, low structure, shining brilliantly beneath the double illumination from cones and comet, and bearing on its face a black tablet covered with knobs and levers, with a single large lever and dial at its center. It was the neutralizing-machine, Marlin knew, the machine that was cutting off the sun's pull, that was sending the earth hurtling out toward its doom in the comet. Around this machine were grouped a score of grotesque, metallic figures, figures strangely spider-like with their multiple tentacles and limbs, and with square, unhuman heads of metal on which were set the glowing circles that were their eyes. A deep, shuddering hatred shook Marlin as he saw them for the first time.

He turned his gaze to the right and saw, at the edge of the plateau there, the low, rough cabin, and beyond it the great chart which Coburn had described to him, a large ground-glass screen on which moved the small white disk that was earth and the great green disk that was the comet,

the latter encircled by the thin green line that marked the limits of its gravitational grip. And as Marlin's eyes fell upon it, his heart leaped uncontrollably. For the earth-disk on the chart was only a few inches from the thin green line around the comet, the neutral between its gravitation and the sun's. And swiftly that tiny gap was closing.

For the first time the significance of the hovering cones above struck Marlin. The invaders were leaving, their work accomplished. In a few moments earth would have passed forever inside the comet's grasp, and they could destroy the great machine with a flash of the light-ray, and speed off in their cones, leaving earth to its doom. It was the end.

Marlin's brain was whirling, his hands trembling, but he hesitated only for a second, then crawled slowly forward from behind his flimsy shelter. Out over the plateau, beneath the glaring light from above, he crawled on toward the machine, half-hidden by the tall grasses that covered the plateau. For ten yards he crept forward, then stopped, and ventured to raise his head a little and look ahead.

The last of the metal figures on the plateau were trooping into the remaining cone, through the opening in its side. There remained only four or five who were standing beside the great

machine, beside the switchboard. And in the moment that Marlin saw these, they discovered him. He saw them turning and evidently gazing straight toward him. A moment Marlin crouched there, petrified, and then he rose to his feet with a mad shout and raced straight across the plateau toward the switchboard of the great machine.

Even as he rose to his feet two of the little group at the machine flashed toward him, with incredible speed, and before he had covered a dozen paces they were upon him. He felt himself gripped by cold coiling tentacles, grasped and thrown to the ground. For a moment he struggled frantically, then heard a hoarse cry, and wrenched his head up to see a dark shape speeding across the plateau from the opposite edge. It was Coburn!

Twisting in the remorseless grip of the two with whom he battled, he had a flashing glimpse of Coburn racing towards the machine, and then he uttered a cry of agony. From one of the hovering cones above, a shaft of the light-ray had flashed down and it struck Coburn squarely. A moment he was visible, aureoled in a halo of blinding light, and then he had vanished. Marlin closed his eyes, ceased his struggles. He felt himself jerked to his feet by his two captors.

He opened his eyes, then, and

stared dazedly over toward the great chart. The earth-disk there was less than an inch from the green neutral-line. It was all over. He and Coburn had shot their feeble bolt and failed. He felt himself being jerked forward toward the last cone, sagging between his captors in dull despair.

BUT what was that sudden crash of metal at the machine, that rush of movement there? Marlin's head snapped up with sudden hope. A single metal figure had sprung out of the group beside the machine, a figure oddly manlike, with only two tentacles and two limbs, that leaped toward the switchboard of the great machine.

"Hanley!"

He screamed aloud, and at the same moment was released, thrown to the ground, by his two guards, who also raced toward the switchboard. From the cone on the ground there poured forth a stream of metal figures, and the droning giants above dropped swiftly down toward the machine. Hanley was beside the switchboard, had reached up with a swift tentacle and grasped the great lever at its center. From cones above and metal figures below, a dozen shafts of the brilliant light-ray flashed toward him. But in the fraction of a second before they reached him, he had wrenched the great lever far

around the dial, and the next moment a titanic explosion rocked the island to its foundation. Marlin was knocked backward by a terrific gust of force, and had only a single flashing glimpse of all at the center of the plateau, machine and metal figures and hovering cones, shooting skyward at lightning speed.

He staggered to his feet, dazed, half-blind, reeled drunkenly forward and then stopped short. For at the center of the plateau there yawned a terrific gulf, a vast pit torn from the earth in a single instant. Cones and machine and invaders had vanished utterly in that tremendous cataclysm, blown off into space when Hanley had swung the lever, and had neutralized earth's gravity, for that single moment and at that single spot, instead of the gravity of the sun.

Marlin staggered along the edge of that mighty abyss, toward the great chart-screen at the plateau's edge. It had been twisted and bent by that tremendous detonation, but it still functioned, and on it there moved still the two disks, the earth and comet symbols. Marlin stumbled closer, his whole soul fixed upon the screen. The tiny earth-disk there was still creeping forward toward the green neutral-line around the comet, moving slower and slower, but still moving. Slower, slower, it moved. Now it

was just a half-inch from the line, a quarter, an eighth. By then it was hardly moving. It had touched the line, now, hovered at its edge. Hovered as the earth was hovering, at that moment, on the neutral between sun and comet, hesitating, tottering— And then Marlin cried aloud.

For the white disk was moving back!

Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the earth-disk was falling back from that thin line, swinging back into its usual orbit, pulled back again by the sun's far-reaching power, pulled back from the very edge of doom.

Marlin raised his tear-stained face toward the great comet above, a single vast sea of green flame, immense, titanic. It was passing, now, passing out of the solar system for all time, its one chance of stealing our earth gone forever. He shook his fist toward it in mad defiance. "You lost!" he screamed, in insane rage and triumph. "Damn you, you lost!"

IT was twilight of the next day when Marlin left the island, paddling slowly out from it on the crude little log-raft which he had fashioned. Shadows of dusk were falling upon the world, deepening into darkness. In the west there trembled forth a star. Still he crept on.

Night, and up from the east there rose again the comet. Mar-

lin lapsed in his progress at that, gazing toward it. Small and shrunken and harmless, it seemed now, its evil glory fast waning as it thundered out into space on its appointed course. He wondered, momentarily, what frenzies of thanksgiving were shaking the peoples of earth to see it thus receding, to see themselves thus snatched back from the very gates of death.

He turned, for a moment, looking back toward the island. It seemed dark and small, now, a low, black mass of land that stood out indistinctly against the pale-lit waters. Only a tiny speck of land, there in the great lake, and yet on it had been decided the fate of a planet. On it the comet-people had played their great game, with a world as the stake, and on it they had lost, their vast conspiracy smashed, in the end, by Hanley. Hanley, whose human brain, human intelligence, human soul, had lived on in a body of metal, to shatter the invaders' colossal plan at the last, remorseful moment.

Marlin paddled on, a dull ache filling his heart. Coburn, Hanley—they had died for the world, for him, while he still lived on. Yet even now, he could give them something, however little, in return. The homage and the gratitude of a world, when that world learned who had saved it. He could give them that, at least.

The exciting conclusion to the latest novel by the Dean of Science Fiction.—Sometimes we run smack into the very thing we try so desperately to avoid. That's what happened to Captain Trent of the Yarrow. He thought he had neatly avoided getting involved with a planetary president's daughter, but before he was through, he had to wage war against all the space marauders in the Pleiades—or else never see her again.

KILLER SHIP

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrated by NODEL

Synopsis of Part One

When Captain Trent—great-great-great-and-so-on grandson of a long line of ship-captains going all the way back to sailing days on old Earth—was asked to skipper the elderly merchantship Yarrow, he wasn't taken in by the owners' assurances of enormous profits out among the Pleiad worlds—where armed pirate ships had just about put an end to trade. They also argued that he could count on a special "pirate-frustrating device" effective enough to disable any pirate ship foolhardy enough to attack the Yarrow. In addition, they agreed to send along its inventor (McHinny, a ship's engineer), to make sure that the device was used properly. Trent hesitated. In desperation the owners threw in salvage rights.

That's when Trent accepted, even though he knew that the chances of salvaging anything were very slim. He also knew that the owners were more interested in getting the Yarrow into space before an impending insurance-rate increase than they were in profiting by trade. But Trent ignored these considerations—because he had plans of his own.

After several brief stops—to obtain small-arms weapons for his crew—Trent headed for the Pleiad group, but four days out his drive-detector indicated that another ship lay ahead—but it wasn't moving! When the Yarrow closed in and broke out of overdrive, Trent found not one but two ships: a disabled merchantman—the Hecla—and a pirate ship nearby, apparently

too intent on its victim to notice the Yarrow's arrival. Bearing down on the pirate ship, Trent decided to try McHinn's pirate-frustrator, but it failed. Despite his rage at the gadget's failure, he kept a cool head and tried to ram the sleek pirate ship, and almost succeeded, but at the last moment—its bow-plates actually buckling from the impact—it vanished into overdrive, damaged but still dangerous. When it failed to reappear, Trent picked up the passengers and crew of the disabled Hecla and headed for Sira—but not before making emergency repairs in the Hecla engine-room and sending her off—unmanned—on a course that the pirate ship would not be able to follow if it did return.

Among the passengers rescued from the Hecla was Marian Hale (daughter of the planetary president of Loren, who also happened to be owner of the Hecla). Although she was extremely grateful and seemed to take more than the expected interest in her rescuer, Trent preferred to remain aloof, primarily because he didn't want anything personal to interfere with his plans for salvaging the Hecla.

Meanwhile the pirate ship—far from the scene of its defeat—furiously began repairs. It planned to get back to the Hecla, which it hoped might still be lying where it had been disabled.

When the Yarrow reached Sira, Marian asked Trent if she should risk trying to get to Loren, but he was against the idea because he knew that his recent encounter with a single pirate ship certainly hadn't made the space-lanes suddenly safe for travel. When Marian also asked him to talk to her business agent on Sira—before the Yarrow lifted off—Trent's reply was evasive. In fact, he was so worried about any emotional entanglement that he went out to lead a large party of his new—and tough—crewmen in a wild brawl amid the dives and bars adjacent to the spaceport. Before the police arrived to break it up, he hurried his men aboard the Yarrow—they would follow him anywhere now—and lifted off. Thus he had accomplished two important things: he had welded his augmented crew into an enthusiastic fighting unit and—as the instigator of a riot—he had the perfect excuse for not keeping his appointment with Marian.

Out in deep space again, Trent headed the Yarrow for the Hecla's probable new location, and after a long search finally found it. He turned over command to his first mate, ordered him to head for Manaos and wait there for him, then boarded the Hecla with a small force of his best men. The Yarrow then disappeared into overdrive, leaving

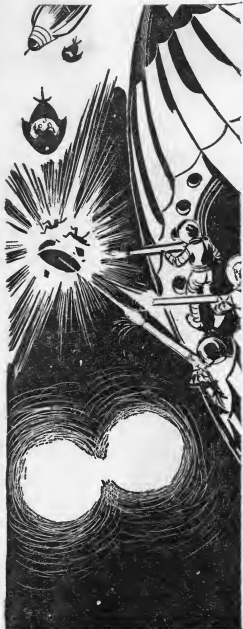
the derelict alone in the emptiness of interstellar space.

Trent set his men to making certain sections of the ship habitable. He didn't want any external repairs on the hull, nor did he want the entire ship refilled with air. In the engine-room he had some of them begin rewinding the blown overdrive-coil, a long, tedious job that he hoped would be completed before the pirate ship's possible return.

He almost made it—because a mere two hours before the job would have been completed, the pirate ship returned. Quickly Trent ordered his men to remove all visible signs of their presence, and—in hiding—they listened as two boarding-parties searched the ship, signalled back all clear, plugged up the shot-holes, refilled the ship with air, and removed their spacesuits to relax with their spoils.

Then Trent's spacesuited men suddenly emerged from hiding and subdued the bewildered pirates with fog-gas, all without any signal being gotten off to the pirate ship lying not half a mile away. Trent ordered the re-winding to continue.

Puzzled by the long silence from its boarding-parties (two-thirds of its crew), the pirate ship began to call by communicator, demanding a report on progress. There was no reply. It called again. Nothing.



Then, quite suddenly, there were swirling clouds, jets, outpourings of vapor, flashes and explosions from the derelict ship.

And in a cloud of utterly impossible vapor, the *Hecla* suddenly vanished.

Part 2

5.

IN the unwritten history of the family line of Captains Trent, there was no other achievement which exactly matched this—because, of course, no exactly similar problem had ever turned up before. The *Hecla* was unarmed save for such equipment as even a small-town police department might possess. But with it Trent had managed to drive away from the repaired pirate-ship with more than half its original crew in captivity aboard, without pursuit by the pirate, and without even an injury to any of his own spacemen. And he was disappointed because he'd hoped to capture the pirate ship itself.

Yet it wasn't an entirely unreasonable feat. The pirate had arrived to find the *Hecla* empty of air, completely unresisting when spaceboats board it, and showing no sign of life after they'd entered it. The boarding-party made reports. They examined the *Hecla* from one end to the other. They reported all well.

It was bewildering that they stopped reporting. There was no alarm, no sign of trouble of any sort. The pirate ship was only half a mile away. So far as it was concerned nothing had happened. Nothing! But two-thirds of its crew was in the *Hecla*, and they'd stopped reporting.

It wasn't a state of things to be handled easily. Action was called for, but what action? The pirate couldn't spare more men to make a third boarding-party. It had a gun, but no reasons to use it and two-thirds of its crew in the *Hecla* to forbid it. There was no action it could take without risks it couldn't estimate, and until the vast outpouring of impossible vapor, violent detonations, and then the absolute vanishing of the supposedly captured ship, even inaction was intolerable. So the pirate had called, and called, and cursed, and called, and once painstakingly circled the *Hecla*, examining it microscopically from the outside and continuing its frantic efforts to extract an answer.

Then came the bursts of vapor and the detonations. The vapor was, of course, all the fog-gas-contaminated air in the ship, released at once with more fog-gas poured into the outgoing flood. The flashes were tear-gas bombs exploded outside the ship on the side away from the pirate. And the vanishing of the *Hecla* was

simply her rewound overdrive coil in action, with the repaired Lawlor drive pushing at capacity to make use of it while the pirate still desperately tried to make contact with its boarding-parties.

The final element the pirate could not understand was the vapor. Gases released in space fling themselves precipitately in all directions toward nothingness. But here was a cloud in space. And the answer they didn't think of was that fog-gas was not a vapor but a suspension of ultramicroscopic particles, which do not repel each other with the vehemence of gas-particles.

So the pirate ship lay stunned and bewildered, contemplating the vapor-cloud where the *Hecla* had been slowly spread, thin and finally disappear.

That cloud, obviously, was more stage-setting. The ordinary criminal is a very practical person—but timid. He is deeply suspicious of things he does not understand, and Trent had arranged a series of events that would be wholly mystifying to anybody who hadn't seen the preparations to bring them about. By the time the pirate skipper—stammering, frustrated, his mind effectively scrambled—looked at the overdrive detector to see if the *Hecla* had vanished in overdrive, Trent had made a full-velocity overdrive

dash. He was counting on confusion in the pirate's control-room.

When the pirate's detector was finally examined, Trent was some thousands of overdrive miles away but in normal space again, listening for a possible radar-pulse. By the time the pirate attempted that, to find out why no drive-field registered on his instruments, Trent was back in overdrive on an entirely new course.

For a very considerable period, then, he alternated between time in and time out of overdrive. For as long as the pirate stumbly tried to follow, Trent ran the *Hecla* on a zigzag pattern of tracks which his ancestors in the last two wars on Earth would have recognized. They'd used it to thwart submarines. Captain Trent of the *Yarrow* and the *Hecla* used it to elude a pirate.

It worked very well. In due time he approached the world of Manaos. Again in due time its landing-grid sent up fumbling, nudging fields of force that locked onto the *Hecla* and drew her down to ground.

There Trent adopted the manners and customs of businessmen. With great sedateness, he reported to the spaceport authorities that he'd brought in the salvaged *Hecla*, which had been attacked by pirates. A full account of the event was on file on the planet Sira. Disabled, her

overdrive and Lawlor units useless, her air gone, and the return of the pirate to be anticipated, she'd been abandoned by her captain and crew. An account of this was also on file on Sira. He, Trent, had found and salvaged her. Now he resigned her to the custody of the Admiralty Court on Manaos, making due claim for salvage on the ship as well as the cargo.

At this point he mentioned negligently that he had twelve members of the pirate's crew welded into an emptied cargo-hold. Since their capture they had been supplied with food and water through small openings. He'd be glad to have them taken off his hands. Then he asked if by any chance the *Yarrow*, his proper ship, had come into port on Manaos.

She hadn't.

There was great enthusiasm over the capture of the pirates. An imposing array of police ground-cars, with copters flying overhead, sped to the spaceport to receive them from Trent. Cheering throngs watched the cavalcade speed by. Crowds tried to crash the spaceport gate to watch as the police boarded the *Hecia* to remove the prisoners. Trent and his crewmen identified them separately—formal depositions would be made later—and then let the police bring them out of the cargo-hold.

After nearly two weeks' imprisonment with no coddling, the prisoners were not prepossessing. They were unshaven, disheveled and repulsive. But above all, they were defiant.

Stridently and furiously, they announced to news cameras that they would not be hanged. Their shipmates and their ship's companion pirate vessels would be working from this moment to gather hostages for their safety. They'd take and hold tens of dozens of spacemen and space-travellers prisoner. If anything happened to the captive pirates, much more and worse would befall the prisoners the pirates would take. The un-piratical Pleiad worlds could count, rasped the prisoners, on having not less than a dozen crewmen and passengers in space murdered for every pirate punished. There would be picture-tapes, presently, of the details of sample pirate captives being killed, to show precisely what would happen on a larger scale if Trent's captives were harmed.

These threats, of course, were broadcast live to every vision-screen on the planet. Then small and very agile spacecraft took to space and vanished, bound for the other Pleiad worlds, bearing the most valuable cargo such minute spacecraft could carry: news. They'd be paid so extravagantly for such news that they

felt justified in taking the risk of being captured by pirates.

The twelve prisoners were transferred by helicopter to an official prison, since their defiance meant danger to them if they were carried through the streets. Then police had to be posted about the *Hecla* to protect Trent from admirers and still more from newsmen.

He was practically besieged in the *Hecla* for three days. Then the cordon of camera-carrying watchers more or less diminished because the *Hecla's* salvage crew, at large upon the town, proved to be a much more exciting source of news. They'd originally slipped out of the ship to spend their pay, but they found that they couldn't do so because everywhere they were surrounded by admirers who wouldn't let them pay for anything. People gloated because somebody had been victorious over a pirate ship—the victory consisting of escape from it and the use of police-type weapons against a dozen of its crew. The men who'd salvaged the *Hecla* found innumerable friends who wanted to buy them drinks and bask in their society. They even found themselves possessed of vast charm to the ladies they met about the spaceport. They told highly embroidered tales of pirates, piracy and deeds of derring-do. Soon everybody was

convinced that the age of piracy was at an end.

Trent waited for the *Yarrow*. He found himself less popular than his crewmen. They, at least, said nothing discouraging to anybody. But Trent did. Asked for advice about ships taking to space again, he pointed out that he'd cost one pirate ship some men. That was all. There might be more than one pirate ship. He was inclined to think, he said curtly, that the planets of a given star-group should cooperate and establish something like an armed force to make piracy unprofitable. That wouldn't be so impractical. But he did not think that his own personal salvage of one ship disabled by pirates justified anybody else in lifting off ground. Not yet.

His opinion was too sensible to make a good news story. In the first week after he brought the *Hecla* to ground, no less than three previously grounded ships left the Manaos spaceport to attempt business as usual but at higher prices among the stars. During the second week, four more left for emptiness. In the third week—when he was beginning to worry about the *Yarrow*—four more lifted off. The same thing was undoubtedly happening through the Pleiad group as the news of Trent's achievement spread.

He wasn't happy about it.

When the *Yarrow* finally came into port, long after sundown, the mate reported stolidly that he'd completed the trading deals Trent had arranged on Sira. He felt that he could have traded much more and at a higher profit but for the news that tiny news-carrying craft were spreading energetically through the Pleiads.

"All kinds of ships are lifting off," said the mate, still impassive. "They're racing to try to hit high-priced markets with their merchandise. That Miss—Miss Hale, she took passage on the *Cytherea*, bound first to Midway and then to Loren. She left port the same day we did. There's a letter for you."

He handed it over. Trent read it. He swore despairingly.

* * *

Long ago and away back in the succession of Captains Trent who were first sea-captains and then space-skipper—a very long time ago—a certain Captain Trent, after due reflection, decided that he'd made a mistake about the young lady he'd just bidden a decorous goodbye to on the quarterdeck of a ship owned by her father. Having reflected, he decided that she shouldn't, after all, be allowed to return to a state of tutelage under such a man. He was plainly not calculated to be a good influence, nor a fit companion for her, and posi-

tively not qualified to pass on so important a matter as who should be the young lady's husband. And having come to this conclusion, that Captain Trent immediately put out to sea to overtake her ship. Conservative persons considered that he carried a hazardous amount of sail, considering the weather. But it was rumored that he had permitted no delay for any purpose whatever except the leading and shooting of his barkentine's guns.

This, however, was hardly a parallel to Trent's actions now. His motivation was a polite and wholly decorous letter from Marian Hale.

Dear Captain Trent:

I've just heard of your marvelous achievement in re-taking the Hecla, from pirates who'd boarded her, and of coming into port on Manaos with half the pirate crew in irons. I am boasting that I know you personally! Please let me suggest, though, that you let my father make a proposal in settlement of salvage on the Hecla. It will certainly not be less to your advantage than an Admiralty Court award, and the legal expenses will be much less!

I do hope you will bring the Hecla to Loren in completion of such an arrangement! I am anxious to have my father thank you for me as I thank you for myself. Since you have made the space-

ways quite safe again, I am sailing for home on the Cytherea, which will leave today and stop first at Midway and then go on to Loren. I do hope to introduce you to my father. He owes you so much! And so do I.

Sincerely,

Marian Hale.

Considered dispassionately, it was not a remarkable letter, though in its composition it had cost much more effort and spoiled paper than most. But Trent didn't read it dispassionately. Marian was in space. Now. And there were pirate ships in space. He burst into explosive words at the next to last sentence. The *Yarrow's* mate stared at him.

"I've sold some of the *Yarrow's* cargo," said Trent feverishly," but no money's passed, so that's all right. I'm going to get the *Yarrow* cleared for immediate lift-off for Loren. You get the small-arms from the *Hecla* while I get clearance and a lift-off order." Then he said fiercely, "Don't let anything keep you from having those small-arms on board and anything else you have to have by the time I'm back!"

He left the *Yarrow* and practically at a run headed for the spaceport office. He swore bitterly. In a perfectly real sense it was not his business that Marian Hale took passage on a space-

ship at a time he considered dangerous. It wasn't his business that ships lifted off from Manaos at the same time. But he'd brought Marian off the *Hecla* when by the laws of probability neither she nor any other member of the *Hecla's* company should ever have been heard of again. Even now he felt no responsibility for any of the *Hecla's* crew. They could take care of themselves. But Marian couldn't. Trent had the extremely unhappy feeling that nobody but himself was qualified to protect Marian from disaster. He'd proved it. Now she was very likely heading for further disaster, and again nobody but himself seemed qualified to do anything about it.

When he reached the spaceport office, it was more than two hours after sunset. A clerk was on duty, to be sure, but he was on stand-by watch, reading placidly in an office chair placed in a good light. He looked up inquiringly when Trent came in the office door.

"Lift-off clearance," said Trent curtly. "The *Yarrow*. She came in an hour ago. I'm taking her out again. Make it fast!"

The clerk recognized Trent. There weren't many people on at least half a dozen of the Pleiad planets who wouldn't have recognized him today, tomorrow and probably the day after tomorrow. But fame is fleeting, notoriety

even more so, and Trent did not and wouldn't ever have that steady, recurrent, repetitive mention in the newstapes that would make anybody recall his name after three days of public inattention. But the clerk did recognize him tonight. He even tried to be obliging, though there was difficulty.

"The *Yarrow* came in under her mate," said the spaceport clerk uneasily," and you want to take her out again as skipper. I know it's perfectly all right, Captain, but I can't order the grid operator to lift you off unless—"

Trent exploded. The clerk, looking almost frightened, set about unsnarling red tape. Trent paced up and down the office, muttering to himself, while the clerk made interminable vision-phone calls, located somebody who would have to sign something, somebody else who would have to authorize something else, and still somebody else to put an official stamp on it. Sometimes Trent paused to listen in on a particular conversation, and then he'd begin to pace again. Finally he headed for the gleaming row of public vision-phone booths in the lobby.

Trent wasn't the only one with troubles. Back at the *Yarrow* the mate was tearing his hair. Word had somehow gotten out that the *Yarrow* was about to lift off. He was being besieged. A freight-

broker, in particular, offered double freight and something extra for the mate to take one large crate to Loren. The mate did not know whether to pass up the business or to accept it. The crewmen hadn't gotten back with the small-arms, and he didn't know what to do about it. Trent wasn't one to turn down business. . . . Before he could decide what to do, the mate was called away to answer a message from the spaceport office. It was Trent, insisting on haste.

In the mate's absence a big truck ran the crate up to a cargo-door, and it was hoisted aboard.

* * *

At this point, just as he was apparently about to receive clearance, a totally frustrating and bewildering development crushed Trent's plans. The highest authority on the planet ordered that no ship be lifted off or allowed to lift itself off from the spaceport until further notice. Police arrived and stood by, lounging, so that spaceport crews would comply. More police appeared. Presently the spaceport was totally police-occupied.

Trent protested furiously, and as he was a personage of some note since his capture of pirates, a high official told him in confidence that there'd been an ultra-long-range message from the other side of the solar system. A ship bound for Manaos had been

stopped by a pirate. Then—incredibly—it had been released, but with a sealed message from the pirates. That ship was on the way and should land tonight. And it was being met at the spaceport by what was practically the government of Manaos—because Trent had brought in pirates captured in the act of piracy, and those prisoners had threatened retaliation from their fellow-freebooters. This message might be another threat.

Trent clenched and unclenched his hands. A message from the pirates might mean anything. It could even tell something about Marian. He found his throat gone dry. He waited. The news had come from a ship already broken out of overdrive. It was now racing at full Lawlor-drive speed toward Manaos, but it could not use overdrive in the areas where a planet had broken up into asteroids or where the elongated orbits of comets might interfere. But it would arrive before dawn.

And it did. A small, battered trading-ship, which the landing-grid brought down through lowering dark clouds that hid all the stars. It dropped slowly into the light cast upward from the spaceport, and settled smoothly to ground. Large sleek ground-cars of officialdom immediately sped over to where it rested. Police blocked the approach of anybody else, including Trent. He

found himself surrounded by newsmen and wondered bitterly how they knew what was going on.

The newsmen saw nothing. Neither did Trent. It seemed that aeons passed while the shiny cars stayed motionless about the distant ship. It was far away over the spaceport tarmac, nearly as far as the lacy landing-grid reached.

At long last the sleek cars raced away, escorted by police vehicles. Only one of them turned toward the spaceport office building, and newsmen broke the police cordon to get there first. Trent went along with the rest. This would be a news briefing.

It took place inside the terminal, of course, which was spacious enough for many passengers and their luggage to gather before they took ship and went away among the stars. But now a big, red-haired spokesman climbed up on a table to make the official announcement. He looked disillusioned but his voice boomed anyway.

"Some hours ago," he announced, "a microwave message was received from the other side of the solar system. It stated that the ship *Castor* was coming in with a message from the Pleiad pirates, who had captured her, held her two days, and then released her minus half her

crew. The details of the message relate to the pirates taken prisoner and now awaiting trial here on Manaos."

Lights flashed at irregular intervals as cameramen got close-ups for the morning newstapes. Shielding his eyes with a large hand, the official went on, as loud as ever:

"The message, directed to this government, was in a sealed envelope. It declared that the pirates are now taking prisoners from ships they stop. They are, in fact, deliberately capturing ships to take prisoners. They swear that if we hang their companions, they will hang—or do worse to—ten of their prisoners for each one of ours. The rest of the message pertains to the arrangement by which we can communicate with them. The text of the main letter will be released later. The proposed arrangement for communication and for exchange of prisoners, of course, cannot be made public."

Then he stepped down from the table into a swarm of newsmen barking questions—they knew he wouldn't answer unless he lost his temper. But that wasn't likely. Police helped him to get his car through the senselessly jostling throng, with equally aimless flash-units continuing to make explosive white flames all about.

Trent returned to the *Yarrow*

to find the crewmen back, finally, with the small-arms he had wanted from the *Hecla*. At least that had been taken care of. Some time during the morning, he believed, he might be able to reach an official high-enough-up to get him special clearance for the *Yarrow* to be lifted to space. After all, he had fought a pirate ship and won the fight—to a limited degree. If any ship should be allowed to take to space, it should be the *Yarrow*. He could even—and here he knew a mirthless amusement—insist that he had to go out to space in order to try out McHinnny's invention. It might work.

Actually, it wasn't necessary to mention McHinnny's gadget. The *Yarrow* had applied for lift-off for the purpose of a voyage to Loren. Permission was granted—if she would agree to carry mail to that destination. No reference was made to the huge crate containing an overdrive coil-unit to be delivered to a consignee there.

The permit and an extremely thin mail-sack came to the ship by the same messenger. Perhaps Trent should have put two and two together. He didn't—because he'd been trying to learn if the half-crew left in the small message-carrying ship had learned anything about a ship called the *Cytherea*. They hadn't. And that news made Trent even more sav-

agely anxious to get to space. So he was much too preoccupied to check on a number of last-minute details such as a big crate in the cargo-hold.

It was just barely sunrise when the landing-grid's force-fields fumbled at the *Yarrow*, tightened, then began to lift the ship swiftly upward. It happened to be a very fine sunrise, one with more extraordinary and more beautiful colors than are usually seen by early risers.

But the *Yarrow*, too intent on other things, failed to notice and went up and up through that splendid dawn—into emptiness.

6.

When the spaceport landing-grid released the *Yarrow*, she was a full five planetary diameters out from Manaos. She'd lifted off at sunrise, spaceport time. Seen from Space, Manaos was a magnificent half-disk, brilliantly green and blue where the sun shone on it, abysmally black where lit only by the stars. But if one watched for a few minutes through a viewport, he could see the dark half of the disk displayed very faintly by starlight. Sharp eyes could even see the ghostly specks and spirals of cloud-systems on the night side. Corresponding cloud-formations on the daylight side were blindingly white.

But Trent was in no mood to regard the wonders of the heavens. He aligned the *Yarrow's* drive-axis for a certain fourth-magnitude star. It was the aiming-point for a ship intending a passage from Manaos to Loren. He displaced it enough to allow for that star's proper motion, and Manaos' sun's proper motion, and the fact that the light from Loren's sun had been a certain number of years on the way here and therefore did not represent the present position of Loren at all. He snapped into the ship's speaker-system: "Overdrive coming. Ten seconds. Count down."

He counted down himself, from ten to nine and eight and so on to zero. He pressed the overdrive-button—and instantly fought dizziness, acute nausea, and immediately afterward that ghastly, spiralling, plummeting sensation of falling through ilimitable emptiness that accompanies going into or breaking out of overdrive.

Then, abruptly, he was back in the pilot's chair, and the viewports were black as if sunk in tar. Somehow the normal, minor operating sounds within the ship were welcome and deeply satisfying. Because they meant that the *Yarrow* was alive and functioning, that it was going somewhere and therefore would ultimately arrive.

Trent began to calculate in his head. While he'd been on *Manaos*, waiting for the *Yarrow*, no less than eleven ships had taken off for space in the bland conviction that because Trent had come out on top in a fight with a pirate, they also could now travel confidently to high profits before the rest of the Pleiads dared try it.

The same thing had happened elsewhere. Ship-owners on a dozen worlds, feverishly anxious for the profits they'd been missing, convinced themselves that the danger from piracy had diminished past the point where it needed to be considered. And most of those ships would make their voyages in safety because there were so many of them and the limited number of pirates could make only so many captures. But that didn't mean less danger. It only meant that the same danger was distributed among more ships.

Trent fumed about it, though it was strictly none of his business. Yet he couldn't help but consider it his business as regarded Marian. The ship she'd sailed on was statistically in less danger than the *Hecla* had been, but the improvement was in the probability of being captured, not the consequences. The disaster to any ship captured was as final as before. More so, if the pirates were deliberately taking ships to get prisoners. . . .

He couldn't sit quietly in the pilot's chair and envision such things. He got up, jerked a thumb for the man on control-room watch to take over, and went to the engine-room.

McHinny nodded portentously at him. "I got my gadget built up again," he reported proudly, "and it's better than it ever was before! It'll take care of any pirate ship that ever was!"

"You're sure of it?" asked Trent.

"I know my gadget!" said McHinny confidently. "Yes, sir! Nobody's going to have to worry about pirates any more!"

Trent said, "It'll be too bad if we have to depend on it and it doesn't work!"

"I know what I'm doing!" insisted McHinny. "I know what you're doing, too! You want to make it look like it's no good! You handle it wrong on purpose! But you can't do that any more! Not now!"

Trent grunted. It is traditional for operational officers—they used to be called deck officers—not to admire engineers. It is equally traditional for engineers to despise operational officers. There has never been a solution to this problem. On the whole, the engineers have the best of the feud because they can make it impossible for operational officers to function, and the reverse is unfortunately not true.

Trent turned to the engine-room door.

McHinny said suspiciously, "I know what you think! You've got an extra overdrive unit in the hold because you think my gadget might blow your overdrive next time you try to use it! You're all set for it! But you wait! You see what happens!"

Trent went out. McHinny angered him, but it was good to have something to be angry about which wasn't connected with Marian. He was in a state of acute, irritated anxiety about her. Since he'd gotten her out of one very bad situation, it was infuriating to find her promptly in another that he might not be able to take care of. He could make no plans for action, of course. There was no proven need for it; and if it should be needed, he'd have no idea where to act, or how. He was driving for Loren because he couldn't endure indefinite uncertainty. If the *Cytherea* came into port on Loren with Marian aboard, he would be sure of her safety. He would also have made a fool of himself, because he had no really valid reason for going to Loren except to ease his mind. But if the *Cytherea* didn't come into port with her aboard. . . .

It wouldn't be his fault. He'd told her he didn't think it safe for her to put out to space. But in a sense it would be his fault

because it was his doing that merchantmen throughout the Pleiads were taking to space under the delusion that danger from pirates was now ended. And that had happened because he'd snatched her from deadly danger. He couldn't be criticized for that. But if he'd simply thrust his pirate prisoners out an airlock, the present situation wouldn't exist. So he blamed himself for not doing that.

Time passed. There was no possible way for the *Yarrow* to know what went on outside its strictly limited overdrive-field. It was isolation as complete as that of an imaginary body in early Einsteinian speculation, which in theory might accumulate such enormous mass that it would warp space about itself and cease to exist in the cosmos inhabited by men. To all intents and purposes that was what overdrive did. Nobody inside an overdrive field of critical or higher intensity could be reached by any object or signal, or be affected by any force or thing—except another overdrive field. But to drive in such loneliness for days and days while worrying about Marian—it wasn't good for Trent. There is nothing so abrasive to one's nerves as waiting helplessly for something to happen when one's highest hope is that it won't, and yet nothing can be done to prevent it.

The *Yarrow* had been in overdrive for a little over eight ship-days—for a fraction more than two hundred hours—when the alert signal went through the ship.

"Overdrive detector registers, sir," said the man on control-room watch. "Captain, sir! Our overdrive detector's registering!"

Trent made his way quickly to the control-room. A red light was calling attention to the overdrive detector dial. There was another ship in detector-range, and it was in overdrive, too.

Trent took his seat at the control-board. He gave crisp orders. All hands ready for spacesuits. Small-arms to be passed out. He called McHinny and told him that his gadget might undergo an actual combat test. Then he watched, tensely, but somehow relieved that some sort of action might be substituted for mere frustrated waiting.

Some centuries earlier, a Captain Trent had lured a privateer out of a harbor where she had been amply protected by the guns of a fort. He towed an improvised sea-anchor of canvas behind his ship. Because of the drag, his ship appeared both slow and unhandy. So the privateer came out to make a capture. In the forgotten fight that followed on one of Earth's oceans,

at the critical moment Trent had the tow-line cut, and simultaneously uncovered guns of heavier weight and longer range than the privateer had suspected. He also revealed that the formerly logy and slow-sailing ship could not only out-fight but outrun the quasi-piratical ship that had attacked it. In consequence the privateer's flag presently came fluttering down. That Captain Trent then put the privateer's crew into her boats with food and water, and he and his prize sailed away over the horizon while the abandoned privateers cursed him heartily.

But Captain Trent of the *Yarrow* could not look for such a happy termination of this affair. At the moment, the situation was simply a deflection of a needle from its proper place on an instrument-dial. He didn't have guns heavier than those of the other ship. He had no guns at all. Further, he hadn't the legs of the other ship. The *Yarrow* wasn't built for fighting or running away. And her overdrive unit hadn't the power per ton of ship-and-cargo mass that the piratical ship would be sure of. In overdrive the pirate ship could undoubtedly blow the *Yarrow's* field-generating equipment without any trouble at all.

Nevertheless, after such long inactivity, any kind of action was welcome—and this was action.

Trent watched the detector-dial. The other ship might sheer off. If so, it was an honest merchantman experiencing the jumping jitters because its detector would be giving a positive reading too. If it didn't sheer off

....

It didn't. The strength of the signal increased steadily on the dial. The other ship was beginning to close in on the *Yarrow*. To all appearances, the prospects were for a matter-of-fact approach to fatal nearness, despite such dodgings and twistings as the *Yarrow* might attempt. The dial-reading grew stronger still. Trent changed course. The reading continued to show a steady, closer approach of the invisible other vessel. It had changed course in pursuit. The dial needle neared that red hand which meant a dangerous proximity of two ships. When the needle touched the edge of the red area, either one of two evenly matched overdrives might blow out. But there was a black mark somewhere in the red. If the needle reached that mark, the *Yarrow's* drive would blow. It would have to.

Trent spoke curtly into the microphone before him.

"Engine-room, I'm going to charge your gadget. Right?"

McHinny's voice, shrill and unreasonably pettish, snapped back: "*Go ahead! Dammit, she's ready!*"

Trent had his finger on the charge-button which should draw some thousands of kilowatts into the pirate-frustrator capacitors, to be stored up until it could be released in a surge of multi-megawatt violence lasting for the forty-thousandth of a second. Nothing could withstand it. Nothing! Any drive phased into it would blow with insensate violence.

He'd actually begun to put pressure on the charge-switch when he stopped. If the gadget worked, the other ship would be disabled. Its drive-coil might be irreparably ruined, so its crew couldn't rewind it to serviceability. And it was not probable, but it was possible that the other ship might not be a pirate. It might be an honest trading-ship with an inattentive hand on control-room watch. Carelessness could happen.

He shifted his hand. He said into the all-ship microphone:

"We'll break out of overdrive first. Get set. Three, two, one, zero!"

He flipped the breakout switch. Dizziness, momentary nausea, and the feeling of a horrible spinning fall. Then stars flashed into being out the viewports and on the vision-screens. The *Yarrow* made a curious bobbing motion, quaintly like a curtsey of greeting to the universe to which it had returned. There

were stars by multiples of millions.

And there was a flaming yellow double sun to starboard, near enough for each of its monster components to have visible disks a third of a degree across. If a double sun could have a planetary system, the *Yarrow* would have broken out inside it. There was brilliant, glaring, intolerable light that felt blistering until the viewports' automatic filters reduced it.

Trent said evenly: "I think we've got company. If that other ship goes on without stopping, its skipper ought to break the man in the control-room for inattention to duty. If it doesn't go by. . . ."

The mate said stolidly: "You cut off the drive and the detector too, Cap'n."

Trent nodded.

"Either our overdrive or theirs had to blow some time soon. I cut ours to make it seem to blow. But if I kept the detector on, they'd know it didn't. I'm hoping—"

He reached over and cut the Lawlor drive too. In or out of overdrive, the Lawlor drive propelled the *Yarrow* on her course. Where this encounter took place, of course, a Lawlor drive alone was just about as useful as a pair of oars.

"We're acting like a derelict—a crippled ship—anyhow. We'll

see what the other ship does. Meanwhile I'll charge the gadget."

This time he did press the charge-button, to draw on the *Yarrow's* power-bank for thousands of kilowatts for minutes in succession, to be discharged at will in a practically instantaneous surge of pure electric energy.

There was a crash and a roaring that became a bellow. The smell of vaporized metal and distilled insulation ran through the ship. The crash was so loud that for seconds afterward Trent heard nothing. The first sound his recovering ears did hear was McHinny's voice, shrilling profanity at the top of his lungs. Then he heard the air-apparatus running at emergency speed to clear away the stench.

He jerked his head at the mate. The mate vanished. Trent sat tensely at the control-board, waiting. With increased return of hearing he noticed rustling, crackling noises. That would be microwave radiation from the nearby double sun.

Then the mate's voice, by loud-speaker in the controlroom ceiling: "*Captain, sir, the gadget's blown again. It just ain't any good!*"

Trent could hardly have become more tense, but it did seem that his muscles tightened further. Yet the *Yarrow* was in no worse situation than it had been

when it rescued the crew—and Marian—from the *Hecla*.

The cracklings and rustling sounds from the double sun were broken into. There was a specifically artificial sound from the space around the *Yarrow*. It was high-pitched to begin with, and it rose swiftly in pitch until it passed the shrillness of the highest of whistles. It was, of course, a single radar-pulse, imitating in the Pleiads the sound-ranging cry of furry flying creatures still called bats on the planet Earth.

"All hands," said Trent evenly. "Get into spacesuits and load all weapons. We've just been hit by a radar-pulse. There'd be no reason for anybody but pirates to follow us out of overdrive and try to locate us by radar."

There were stirrings here and there. The mate came back and said: "Your spacesuit, Captain."

Trent got up from the control-board and slipped into his space-armor. There was another radar pulse, louder this time.

For a long while after that there was something close to silence in the *Yarrow*. True, the air apparatus whirled and cut off. The temperature-control made a new kind of noise. Now it was cutting down the heat-intake from the nearby double sun instead of holding the temperature of the *Yarrow* so many degrees Kelvin above the chill of

empty space. And there were indefinite small sounds which came from the mere presence of living men inside the *Yarrow*.

There was a third radar-pulse. The first had been like a squeaking. This was like a scream.

Then a vision-screen, turned away from the nearby suns, showed the minute specks of blinking, varicolored light that were stars.

A voice came from the outside communicator: "*Privateer Bear of Loren calling. What ship's that?*"

Trent had, of course, anticipated the question. But he wanted to ask one of his own. Marian was off-planet somewhere in one of an unjustified number of suddenly foolhardy ships. All of them couldn't hope to escape capture by privates. But the pirates couldn't hope to capture all of them, either. So Trent needed the answer to one question: Had the *Cytherea* been taken by this particular ship? If not, absolute recklessness was justified. The *Yarrow*, ramming, would not injure or endanger Marian in the process. On the other hand, if the *Cytherea* had been captured and Marian was captive on this ship, then the maddest of recklessness was a necessity. Trent's most desperate obligation would be to smash the pirate at any cost because Marian was on board.

Again the ceiling loud-speaker bellowed: "*What ship's that? Answer or take what you get for it!*"

Trent growled: "This is the *Cytherea*, bound for Loren. And if you're the *Bear*, you'll go about your business! You've blown our overdrive!"

Sweat stood out on his face as he waited to hear. If this pirate ship had taken the *Cytherea*, they'd know the *Yarrow* wasn't the *Cytherea*. And they'd reveal it.

But the voice from outside the ship, from the pirate, was only almost mocking: "*It was the only way we could hail you. You tried to run away. What's your cargo?*"

Trent ran off a cargo-list at random. It didn't matter. He didn't think of the huge crate loaded aboard the *Yarrow* on Manaos. That too didn't matter just now. On the vision-screen a small glittering was taking on the shape of a ship.

The voice from the ceiling speaker said genially: *We can use some of that! We'll come aboard.*"

Trent's eyes burned, now. Marian wasn't aboard this ship. Therefore anything that could be done to deceive, damage, or destroy this pirate could be done from a simple, honest hatred of everything it stood for. And Marian wasn't involved. True,

there seemed nothing to be done —

Trent protested as if angry. The other ship took form as a polished fish-like shape. He argued feverishly, as if he believed he dealt with the privateer *Bear* of Loren, owned by the planetary president who happened to be Marian's father. Actually, it could conceivably be the *Bear*. Or maybe the one that attacked the *Hecla* was the *Bear*. But he didn't care. Marian was in danger; therefore he didn't care whether it was a quasi-legal privateer or an unquestionable free-booter. He meant to try to destroy it, legally or illegally, properly or otherwise.

Meanwhile he protested. His argument was that the *Yarrow*—which he called the *Cytherea*—was bound for Loren and that her cargo was to be delivered to that planet anyhow. As a privateer, insisted Trent, the *Bear* was bound to respect vessels bound for its home spaceport. It had done enough damage! It had blown out his overdrive. It—

"*We'll give you receipts for what we take,*" said the voice from the ceiling loud-speaker. It was almost openly mocking now. "*You'll get what's coming to you! All you have to do is go on to Loren and ask for it.*"

Trent clicked off the communicator and swung about in the pilot's chair.

"On the way out to put us on board the *Hecla* when she was abandoned," he said coldly to the mate, "I had you pack the bow with bales of stuff in case a gun opened on you from ahead. None of that's been shifted, has it?"

"No sir," said the mate, as stolid as ever. "All of it's still there. —You've got him sure our overdrive's blown, sir."

"And if we went into it," said Trent acidly, "he could really blow it just by following us!" He pushed the all-speaker button. "All hands! We've been stopped by something that says its the *Bear*, of Loren. It says we're to be boarded. All hands get ready to get out of sight and come out again on call."

He swung the *Yarrow* to face the approaching and enlarging pirate ship. He yearned fiercely to destroy it, but at that moment the *Yarrow's* own prospects looked dim. For one thing, the first freebooter he'd encountered had had a gun—a cannon firing solid shot. In a sense it was an antiquity. It was probably of a design from the twentieth century, when guns reached their highest development before being replaced by rocket-missiles. Its shells could penetrate both skins of the *Hecla* but had little power to do damage beyond that. One of the other pirate's shells had bounced around in the *Hec-*



la's engine-room without doing any particular harm. But those shells could let all the air out of a ship.

Perhaps this second pirate ship also had a gun.

It was plainly visible now, swiftly increasing in size. There was no sign of injuries to or repairs of its bow-portion, so it couldn't be the ship that had stopped the *Hecla*. It was larger, too. There were, then, at least two spacecraft operating out of some unknown base. There might be more.

The other ship swept to a position a mile to starboard. It checked there and lay still. The mussel-shell-shaped boat-blister

covers opened, revealing spaceboats.

Trent snapped into the all-ship speakers: "Men with rocket-launchers to the air-locks. Rope yourselves safe, and be ready to open the outer doors and start shooting."

He grimaced. The small-arms bought on Dorade were totally useless against a ship, of course, but they might do damage to a spaceboat.

He switched on the communicator again. The voice rasped: "*I'm telling you! Open your cargo-doors! Open your air-locks! There's a boarding-party coming!*"

"Acknowledge," said Trent.

He covered the communicator microphone with his hand and gave short, savage commands. He opened an after cargo-door. It stayed open. A second door started to open but apparently stuck. It went back to closed position. It partly opened and closed again. This could be seen from the pirate ship. It should be taken as attempted obedience. An air-lock door opened. Another. The locks showed no spacesuited figures in them.

The pirate's spaceboats—three of them—moved away from their storage blisters. They came steadily toward the *Yarrow*. The two ships were infinitesimal specks in immensity. The spaceboats were smaller than specks.

Only the blazing double sun was huge. It seemed nearby. All the rest of the galaxy appeared to consist only of uncountable dots of light of every imaginable color and degree of brightness, unthinkable remote.

When the spaceboats were half-way to the *Yarrow*, Trent barked into the all-speaker microphone: "Close face-plates! Take ordered action!"

And he acted as he spoke. The *Yarrow* spun like a top to face the pirate ship and plunged toward it at maximum acceleration in Lawlor drive. But the motion seemed horribly deliberate. Lifetimes seemed to pass at intervals that were only heart-beats. The *Yarrow* rushed upon the pirate—but not quite exactly. She would ride down and destroy the nearest spaceboat first. The pirate did have a gun. It flashed, and there was that hundredth-of-a-second flaring out of smoke before the utter emptiness of space snatched it away to nothingness.

A shell hit the *Yarrow*. Its impact could be heard or felt all over the ship. Spacesuited men appeared suddenly in the open airlocks. Rockets—only police-rockets, but still rockets—streaked away from the open lock-doors. Four—eight—a dozen. One hit a spaceboat. There was a soundless flash. A shaped-charge satchel-bomb went off inside the spaceboat. It had been

meant for the destruction of the *Yarrow* should her crew resist the entrance of their murderers. But one spaceboat had ceased to exist. The *Yarrow's* bow swung to bring a second spaceboat into close range for the rocket-launchers on the port side. The smoke-jetting rockets plunged One of them exploded just the bare instant before another arrived at the very same spot. It was pure chance, but the spaceboat's back was broken, and other rockets hit, too. It was not possible to estimate the total damage from the *Yarrow*.

That elderly merchant-ship continued to hurl itself toward the pirate. The pirate's gun flashed again. It was a hit. And again. A hit. And again. A hit. Every shell hit home. Every one went into her bows and vanished in the bales of textiles and crates of other cargo packed to serve as improvised armor-plate.

In the control-room the instrument-board showed three bow compartments losing air. But the *Yarrow* gained speed every second. The pirate's gun flashed and flashed, and every powder-flash was followed by the crashing impact of a projectile. But the *Yarrow* could take this kind of gunfire for a while, anyhow.

The pirate couldn't take ramming. It went into overdrive while the charging *Yarrow* was still two hundred yards away.

Trent drove his ship fiercely through the emptiness where the pirate ship had been. He swung around and headed vengefully for the third spaceboat. The *Yarrow* passed it at a hundred yards' distance. Rockets flashed and streaked toward it, past it, into it—but it seemed mostly into it. What was left did not look like a spaceboat any longer, and the *Yarrow* seemingly had all of space to itself.

The mate seemed pleased. He said relievedly; "Shall I take some hands and plug those shell-holes, Captain?"

"Not much use," said Trent, coldly. "If we go into overdrive, our coil will blow—unless the pirate goes slinking away. But as long as he's got his gun and shells, he won't do that! We killed off a good lot of his men in those boats, though!"

The mate looked pained.

"What'll we do then, Captain?"

"We'll have to try," said Trent sardonically, — we'll — have — to — try — to — think — of something!"

But it didn't look promising. The pirate had a gun. The *Yarrow* hadn't. The pirate had an intact overdrive coil, permitting it to appear and disappear, to depart and return,—and that overdrive coil would automatically blow out the *Yarrow's* corresponding unit if Trent tried to

make use of it. The pirate had lost a good half of its crew in the lifeboats. Perhaps two-thirds. It definitely would not go away and leave the *Yarrow* to its own devices. The only unusual thing the *Yarrow* had displayed was resolution and a furious willingness to fight. That amounted to a tactical surprise.

But the pirate was now recovered from it. It reappeared. With a raging deliberation, it lay off some two miles from the *Yarrow* and began to pound it with solid shot. When the *Yarrow* charged, the pirate went into overdrive again. The *Yarrow* could have followed, of course, but at the cost of blowing its coil before it had completed the conversion from normal space. It could only remain in the glaring, terrible unshielded sunshine of the double sun. When the pirate appeared, the *Yarrow* dashed at it. But the *Yarrow* had no weapon but itself to damage, its enemy and its defense was only partial, limited even when it was driving head-on for its antagonist. Sooner or later its bow-armor of cargo-bales must fail.

The sequence of a desperate charge—while the pirate pounded it with its cannon—and the disappearance of the freebooter into overdrive, and then its reappearance elsewhere to throw more solid shot—the sequence became almost routine. Trent

turned the *Yarrow* over to the mate and went to check damage. It is always interesting and sometimes useful to put oneself mentally in an enemy's position. He began to imagine vaguely what he'd be able to do with spaceboats if he used them otherwise than as the pirate had.

He began to count up possibilities. Spaceboats would be very poor targets for a gun firing solid shot. But they'd have to get to actual contact to be able to explode a shaped charge usefully. If the pirate went into overdrive at such a moment, it would take the boat with it, and the spaceboat might come back to normal space light-years from any ship or planet or—anything. It would never be heard of or seen in all the centuries and millennia still to come.

Trent would have risked it, for himself. But the *Yarrow* and the men aboard it—

The engine-room was still air-filled. Trent went around to the tiny emergency-lock designed to allow passage to another of the ship's compartments even if one or more of them lost air.

He came out of the airlock in the cargo-hold next astern. He saw the huge crate the freight-broker had practically dumped aboard while the mate was in a state of total confusion.

He looked at it. And if his many-times-great grandfather,

that Captain Trent of the Napoleonic period—if one of his numerous-great grandfathers could have seen the situation and followed Trent's reasoning—why—Captain Trent's ancestor would have been pleased.

7.

There was a ruler named Napoleon, in the old days back on Earth, who made war wholesale and created an empire that seemed invincible. His generals were gifted and his soldiers valiant, and it appeared that all the world must ultimately fall to him. But his ship-captains simply did not match up. The skip-pers of his enemies' nations were superior. Not only the commanders of their men-of-war, but even commercial ship-captains seemed to have the gift of outwitting as well as out-fighting Napoleon's seamen. For example, there was a Captain Trent of that period who was blocked in an excessively narrow sea by a fleet of Napoleon's navy. That Captain Trent had on board an excessively important royal personage who needed badly to get away from where he was. Napoleon just as badly needed to take him prisoner. The Captain Trent of that day managed to hide his ship in a tiny harbor he shouldn't have risked entering. He sent many men aloft and other men

overside. And presently, what with paint and canvas falsework and a complete re-design of her rigging, he'd so changed the appearance of his vessel that he sailed placidly through Napoleon's fleet quite unsuspected of being himself in his own ship. In fact, he was warmly thanked by Napoleon's admiral-in-charge for the specific information he gave about where a certain elusive Captain Trent and a certain much-wanted royal personage could be found.

The situation of a later Captain Trent in the neighborhood of a double yellow sun was totally different in detail, of course. But there were similarities in the swarming activity that went on aboard his ship as soon as he'd worked out what to do. It was the simplest imaginable solution to his problem as soon as it was seen. Only the *Yarrow's* engineer was bitter about it. His gadget had been tried twice. Each time, as soon as Trent tried to charge its capacitors, it had blown itself out with exhaustive thoroughness. Now Trent had men hacking at the monster crate containing an overdrive unit intended to be delivered to Loren. Trent had had the sardonic idea that it was meant to be installed in a privateer intended to be the companion of the *Bear*. He disapproved. But now, suddenly, he had an idea

that he could put it to better use.

A solid shot hit the *Yarrow's* bow. There was the feel of a full-power Lawlor dash at the private ship. The *Yarrow's* mate was not an imaginative person, but he could carry out orders he understood. His orders just now were perfectly clear. Gain time.

Parts of the shipped overdrive coil became exposed. Trent wielded an axe himself, to get the crate cleared away. The engineer, muttering bitterly, brought out cables from the engine-room stores. With Trent watching sharply, he welded them to that perfection of contact needed when currents in the tens of thousands of amperes were to be carried. He led the cables forward to the engine-room. With Trent checking every move, he connected the overdrive coil in the cargo-hold to the overdrive coil in the engine-room. He installed a cut-off switch.

The *Yarrow* now had two overdrive-coils connected in parallel. Each of them was designed to perform a very special feat, most simply if not lucidly expressed as making a hole in the cosmos around the ship, enclosing the ship in that hole, and then pulling the hole inside itself. Two such devices in parallel, when turned on together, should make a much larger hole than one would alone. Together, they should have more power per

ship-and-cargo ton of mass than the pirate ship could possibly have. If the pirate ship and the *Yarrow* were in overdrive at the same time and as near to each other as they were now—why—one overdrive coil would have to blow. Originally, it would have been the *Yarrow's*. Now it should be the pirate's.

Trent made his way back to the control-room. The mate greeted him with relief.

"Another bow compartment's lost air, Captain," he said worriedly. "The old *Yarrow's* likely to get hurt before long. I've had a man for'd checking, but it looks like if we rammed her now we'd get all smashed up—if we could ram her."

"We can," said Trent briefly.

He surveyed the situation. It appeared to be the same as before. The pirate ship winked into existence where nothing had been. It swung about so that its gun would bear on the *Yarrow*. The *Yarrow* rushed at it. The gun got three solid shots into the *Yarrow's* bow, and the pirate vanished into overdrive, where it was unreachable.

Trent said deliberately: "Overdrive coming. Three. Two. One. Zero."

The *Yarrow* vanished—into overdrive.

The yellow double sun poured out its intolerable light and heat. As a double sun it could not have

planets or satellites of any kind. There were no comets, no asteroids, no meteor-streams. The only objects that could ever orbit it, even temporarily, were spaceships. Moments ago there had been two of them, one of which had popped in and out of existence from normal space to overdrive and back again. The other dashed madly about, trying to ride down and ram its former companion whenever and wherever it appeared.

Now, quite suddenly, there was only one. It came out of nowhere. For a long time it was quite alone. Then the other came out of nothingness.

This second ship now lay still, miles from the one that had broken out first. This second ship was damaged. There were shot-holes in its bow-plating. Some of them ran into one another. There was a deep dent where a shell had hit a hull-frame behind the plating, had not penetrated, but had made a deep depression that spoiled the symmetry of its form.

It was, of course, the *Yarrow*. It had gone into overdrive immediately after the pirate ship. It had stayed there. The drive-detector, which told of another ship also in overdrive, flickered and ceased to register anything. That meant, of course, that there was no other operating overdrive nearby. The pirate's drive had

blown out. Now the *Yarrow* had come out of overdrive and could go back into it at pleasure. The pirate ship was in normal space and now could not leave it again. But it still had a gun. That weapon flamed furiously, and solid shot moved through space toward the *Yarrow*. Trent shifted the *Yarrow's* position. At this distance it would take many seconds for the despairing pirate's missiles to reach the place where the *Yarrow* had been.

They reached that place. The *Yarrow* had moved. They went on, forever.

"She blew," said Trent, for all the ship to hear. "Now we could ram her because she can't go into overdrive any longer. But we're all shot up. Better not."

A faint noise came from the loudspeaker overhead. It was a voice. It babbled. It screamed. It begged pathetically. It babbled again. It was a spacesuit in emptiness, and unintelligible cries came from it.

The mate said: "Somehow, Captain, I don't think those pirates would pick up one of us if we was floating out of a smashed spaceboat like this fella."

"No," agreed Trent dourly. "They wouldn't. But they wouldn't need to ask us any questions about where our home port was, or how many ships like us were working out of it. And they wouldn't want to ask us if we

knew anything about a ship named the *Cytherea*."

So he tracked down the voice from a spacesuit that had been in a now-shattered spaceboat. The man in that spacesuit had found himself floating in absolute emptiness. In the confused, furious dashes of the *Yarrow* upon the pirate, both ships had moved many miles away from the spot where the spaceboat had been. Actually, the pirate ship was more than a hundred miles from the senselessly screaming voice. The castaway couldn't pick it out with the naked eye against the background of all the stars. He was alone as no man can remain alone and stay sane. And his screamings had a specific cause. The man in the spacesuit could see the giant, double yellow sun. He could feel its deadly heat. He screamed because he believed he looked at the two round doors which were the entrance-gates to hell. And he felt that he was falling toward them.

The *Yarrow* picked him up, after an hour of searching, but nothing intelligible could be gotten out of him. He'd gone mad from terror.

The *Yarrow* arrived at Loren two ship-days later. She was landed by the spaceport landing-grid, which rose half a mile from the wide flat plains of the colony-world. Trent went aground and straight to the

spaceport office. His first question was about the *Cytherea*. Had she arrived yet? She hadn't.

He said coldly, "Better tell your planetary president that his daughter's aboard her. You might tell him, too, that his privateer has turned pirate and that he has reason to be worried. He and this whole planet may be in trouble because of it. And there's a pirate ship disabled but working hard to make repairs a couple of days' drive back toward Manaos. She's probably in unstable orbit around a double yellow star, but she may be able to patch herself up before the orbit breaks."

Then he said, "And I need repairs, too. But I'll do all right with some steel plates and some good welders. How do I arrange for that?"

There was agitation at the Loren spaceport, especially after the *Yarrow's* crewmen went aground and relaxed in the unprosperous dives outside the spaceport gates. The planet itself was not one of the outstanding human colonies in the Pleiads. It had originally been settled because of a genus of local fibre-producing plants with a high luxury-value. For a time it prospered, producing fabulously soft and fabulously beautiful textile raw materials. The population went up into the millions, and there'd been a time when its

spaceport was busy with ships from half the galaxy come to trade for *ghil* fibre. At that time a certain ecological difficulty seemed trivial. Earth-type vegetation did not thrive on Loren. The planet's native soil-bacteria were excellent for *ghil*-fibre plants, but not for potatoes or corn or commonplace crops like beans. To grow crops for human consumption hormones and vitamin-base compounds and antibiotics had to be imported from off-planet.

Naturally man, everywhere, has to carry the vegetation of Earth with him when he plants a colony, to supply the excessively complex food-compounds the human race has adapted itself to require. Loren was highly prosperous for a long time. But it was a one-product world, subject to the disasters of a one-crop economy. Now it was a backwater world, its commerce stagnant and steadily declining.

Some of the people on Loren were excited about the *Yarrow's* arrival because trade-goods were scarce. Even a privateer, which requisitioned cargoes and gave receipts for them—to be redeemed in *ghil* fibre on Loren—could not supply the imported items a population of five millions needed. So even a single ship-load of assorted imports could cause a wild flurry in the business world on Loren.

Some of Loren's inhabitants were disturbed because they'd felt that the planet was being boycotted on account of its privateer. Now they learned that interstellar trade had practically been destroyed by pirates and that even a privateer must work only empty ship-lanes, to no avail. The *Yarrow* was actually the first off-planet ship to touch ground on Loren in four months.

A few of Loren's people felt a special uneasiness because of the disabled pirate ship Trent had reported. In modern times there were no such things as armies or navies, of course. Police officials had to take over many functions formerly handled by the military. Some of them came to Trent and asked searching questions about the conflict near the double sun.

"We made out," Trent told them," because we'd packed bulk cargo in our bow-sections, and their shells couldn't do but so much damage. If you mean to go after her, you should be able to find her with radar. When you do, you shouldn't have much trouble. She's short-handed. We arranged that. We smashed three spaceboats full of men trying to board us.—Have your doctors been able to get anything out of that pirate we brought in?"

They hadn't. They were recording all his babblings and studying them painstakingly.

There was no doubt about his having been a pirate. But since his present mental state had been produced by an intolerable emotional stress of horror and despair, his babblings naturally were about emotional matters only. From his incoherencies they'd deduced that there were at least three pirate ships in operation, and half a dozen ships captured—but they couldn't be identified. Nor could they get any clue to where his own ship was based, nor a description of that home world, nor anything else that amounted to useful information. He babbled, wept and pleaded not to be returned to space where great yellow suns were the gates of hell and drew him irresistibly toward them.

Trent produced data from Manaos: photos, fingerprints and retinal patterns of the twelve pirates captured by Trent in the *Hecla*. They were the men for whose execution—if it happened—other pirates had sworn to take revenge. Their capture had sent innumerable deluded ships to space again, and there could be no doubt that by now enough spacemen and space-travellers had been captured to let the pirates carry out their most blood-thirsty menaces. Trent mentioned sourly that both Marian and the *Hecla*'s skipper said that pirate ship looked like the *Bear* whose identity the pirate claimed while

demanding surrender. Trent suggested that the police look up the spaceport records of the *Bear*'s crew.

They came back presently, intolerably distressed. The pirates waiting trial—or release—on Manaos had been members of the privateer commissioned by Loren. What should they do?

"If it comes here," said Trent savagely, "blow hell out of it! But I rammed it. There are some repairs they'd have trouble explaining. It probably won't come. It'll go to its real base. It made use of you for information about space-lanes and ship-movements, to make its piratical efforts easier. Now and then it brought in something. But you helped it to the best of your ability!"

The police officials went away again. They were embarrassed.

Trent supervised the beginning of repairs to the *Yarrow*'s shot-punctured bow. They were not difficult. A few hullplates had to be replaced entirely, but damaged frames could be straightened by equipment aground and the shot-holes could be plugged or patch-welded. The inner-skin shot-holes required no more elaborate attention. The cargo-bales damaged by shot were replaced by others. Loren's merchants offered to buy the damaged bales and took them at a price to pay for the repair-work twice over. Hopefully, they of-

ferred *ghil* fibre in payment, and Trent accepted it.

A ship went out to space from Loren. It also belonged to Marian's father. It carried a gun. Its bow was armored with sandbags inside. It carried guided missiles. It also carried volunteers from the planetary police anxious to capture or destroy a pirate ship to make up for their embarrassment on discovering that they'd been an active partner of one.

The *Cytherea* still did not reach port. According to the note from Marian, it had intended to leave the planet Sira the day the note was written. The letter had been brought to Trent, on Manaos, by the *Yarrow*. Immediately afterward the threat from the pirates had arrived. And Trent lifted the *Yarrow* from Manaos less than twelve hours later, when the *Cytherea* should just about have reached Midway. It should have left that planet almost immediately for Loren. It was certainly possible for it to have reached Loren even before the *Yarrow*.

It hadn't. It was now many days overdue.

* * *

The delay was entirely reasonable. The *Cytherea* could have gone to Midway by a roundabout route. It needn't have followed the regular ship-lane from Sira to Midway. If there were a possi-

bility of encountering pirates, it would be intelligent to follow a circuitous pathway. Pirates would tend to wait along the ship-lanes with drive-detectors out and reporting the presence of any ship in overdrive for a completely unbelievable distance.

Again, there might be alarm on Midway—there had been when the *Yarrow* stopped there—and the *Cytherea* could have stayed in port to wait until the pirate danger genuinely abated. She might be peacefully aground. There might be no need to worry. But yet again, there might.

Perfectly reasonable causes might have operated to delay the *Cytherea*. But on the other hand she might have been taken by a pirate. In which case, Trent couldn't know where it had happened or where Marian—as a captive—might have been taken.

Days went by, and more days, and still more. Trent reminded himself of all the separate reasons for the *Cytherea* to be delayed. Roundabout travelling. Very sensible. Alarms of piracy to make her stay in port. Entirely reasonable. Perfectly possible. Almost convincing. But not quite.

Trent suddenly realized that he didn't believe any of them. He simply had no more hope that Marian would ever arrive at Loren in the *Cytherea*. He had no

hope she'd ever arrive anywhere. He was simply, desolately, and arbitrarily convinced that the *Cytherea* had been taken by pirates. Possibly by the *Bear*, which certainly wasn't the free-booter he'd encountered near the double yellow sun.

He gave no outward sign of his conclusion. There was nothing to be done about it. True, the *Yarrow* was fit to take to space again. True, the planetary president had sent word, several times, that he'd like to speak to Trent. But patch-weldings hardly mattered, and Trent simply didn't want to talk to Marian's father. He just didn't want to. With piracy rife in the Pleiads, her father had still let her travel. He was the owner of a privateer, and those who should know—Marian and the *Hecla*'s skipper—declared that the pirate of the *Hecla* affair not only claimed to be the *Bear* but looked exactly like it.

Words came that the planetary president was coming to visit the *Yarrow*, which had defeated a pirate ship near the double yellow star. He was concerned because the ship sent to dispose of that disabled marauder hadn't yet returned.

Trent said sourly to the *Yarrow*'s mate: "You can tell him that even if it surrenders, the police-ship will have to rewind the pirate's drive—if it's to

bring that ship into port. Attending to that will take time. You can also say that maybe they had to use a guided missile on it and are trying to patch it up to come back. That'd take more time. —Oh, tell him anything you please. I don't want to talk to him!"

The mate persisted: "But what'll I tell him about the lady? His daughter?"

"Anything you like," growled Trent. "She should have written him what happened to the *Hecla*. But they say there's been no ship but us to land here in months. So they haven't had any off-planet mail unless it was in the one sack we brought here. Maybe he doesn't know about the *Hecla*. If he doesn't, you can tell him if you choose. I'm claiming salvage out of his pocket for getting her to port after she was abandoned. He'll probably dislike me for that. Anyhow—I don't want to talk to him!"

"Where're you going?" asked the mate.

"Off somewhere until he leaves," said Trent. He shrugged. "I've agreed to take *ghil*-fibre for the money due us for what I've sold here. It's been suggested that I see what a *ghil* plantation is like. It was intended as a courtesy. I'll use it as an alibi."

The mate said nothing. Trent got a ground-car and left the

spaceport before the planetary president could arrive. It was not polite, but Trent was past politeness now. If her skipper hadn't stayed aground on Midway, the *Cytherea*—by any calculation at all—was at least eight days overdue. If she'd been captured by a pirate skip near the beginning of her voyage, she could have been taken twenty-two days ago, and that was well before a small battered ship brought the pirate threat to Ma-naos. Marian could have been dead for three weeks. Or she might not be dead. . . .

Trent drove furiously to the *ghil*-fibre plantation. He wasn't really interested in plantations. It was agony to think of Marian dead or a prisoner of pirates who'd promised to murder ten spacemen or passengers for every one of their number hanged. It was time for him to take action. It happened to be impossible to take appropriate action, but he had to do something! So he resolved savagely to take to space himself as soon as the planetary president left the *Yarrow*.

He had no information, but he'd had a program in mind when he took command of his ship. The owners had offered him salvage rights. He'd used them, as the *Hecla* proved. He had the choice of ports-of-call and other privileges the owners had grant-

ed. He'd use them, though not as might be expected. He'd had some definite ideas about pirate-hunting, which should be an extremely profitable business if one didn't happen to be killed at it. He'd thought of it as an approach to salvage on a considerable scale. He would have preferred definite information to start with, but since he was now suddenly and irrevocably convinced that Marian was dead, he'd set about hunting pirates anyhow, and somehow try to pay back whoever had harmed her.

Meanwhile he drove to the *ghil* plantation to stay where Marian's father wouldn't be. As a visitor from off-planet, one actually buying *ghil* fibre, he was given red-carpet treatment. He saw fields upon fields of *ghil* plants, then planting machinery, cultivating machinery and harvesting machinery. He saw processing equipment and a small research laboratory for improving the quality of *ghil* seeds. The laboratory was run by a squarish elderly scientist who took it for granted that anybody who saw a *ghil*-plant field would immediately be fascinated by experiments in line-bred mutant field-crops. To the original purpose of his research he'd added a new quest for a plant other than *ghil*—to make a new one-cropeconomy for Loren.

He had tiny hothouses in

which he grew assorted samples of vegetation from more than thirty different worlds other than Loren. He maintained appropriate climactic conditions and growing-soil for each separate planet's vegetation in the separate plastic shelters. He almost—almost—aroused Trent's interest when he explained how he could describe the planet a plant came from by examination of a single plant or sometimes even a leaf. He could tell the composition of its atmosphere, its gravitational field-strength, the climate, its temperature-range, and even its seasonal changes all from the leaf of an unidentified botanical specimen. Trent listened with what was almost interest.

But suddenly something made him turn away from this lecture to stare at the horizon behind him. The planet's landing-grid could be seen even from here, but there was a thread of white smoke uncoiling swiftly from within it. Something went blasting toward the sky. It reached the blue. It went beyond. It thinned and thinned and thinned. Then it was gone.

And half an hour later a ground-car screeched to a stop at the *ghil* plantation. It had come for Trent. The *Yarrow's* mate had sent one of the crewmen to give Trent exact information. He was clearing away all scaffolding

and getting ready to take to space immediately after Trent arrived.

Because the *Cytherea* had come into port. An hour since she'd called down to ask coordinates for landing. The landing-grid operator had given them, and fumbled far, far out in emptiness until the grid's force-fields found and locked onto the ship. They brought her swiftly and precisely to ground. In the very center of the spaceport, the *Cytherea* stood upright. A man—one man only—came out of a passenger-port and trudged across the tarmac to the landing-grid's office. He entered and asked if there was mail for the *Cytherea*. There was. One letter. It looked official. It had come in the single bag of mail put on the *Yarrow* just before she was allowed to lift off Manaos.

The single figure from the *Cytherea* trudged back to that ship, carrying the one letter in its official-seeming envelope. He went in the passenger-port. It closed behind him. Then, by space-phone, the *Cytherea* asked for immediate lift-off.

The grid office was astonished. This was so extraordinary that the operator blankly asked why. What was the matter? Wasn't there any cargo? Weren't there any passengers to come aground? Wasn't there one passenger in particular—

The operator should have focussed the grid's force-fields on the ship aground, as if intending to lift her. Then he should have held her aground despite protests or threats. He didn't happen to think of it. Such a thing had never been necessary or desirable. It was—unthinkable.

And then the *Cytherea* suddenly emitted flames that rolled over the empty spaceport tarmac. She lifted on her emergency-rockets and plunged skyward.

When Trent got to the spaceport, already three parts maddened by shock and frustration and grief, the *Cytherea*—which should have had Marian aboard to be landed here—the *Cytherea* was long gone away to space again. She'd long since entered overdrive. She was already millions upon millions of miles away and travelling many times faster than the speed of light. And there was no faintest clue to her destination.

8.

Things added up perfectly to a total of pure frustration. The *Cytherea* had been taken by pirates at some time which could have been anything up to twenty-two days before. At the time of her capture, the pirates knew that some of their companions were prisoners and were to be tried and doubtless executed on

Manaos. Therefore she hadn't been looted and abandoned in emptiness. She'd been reserved for the task she'd just performed—to secure the official answer to their ultimatum. Her passengers and crew might or might not have been murdered, at the time of her capture or any instant later. It was not possible to know.

These items fitted together. In making a demand for the exchange of captured pirates for captured spacemen and space-travellers, the pirates must have named some way by which their demand could be answered. That hadn't been revealed on Manaos, but the *Yarrow* was permitted to lift off for Loren with a flat mail-sack before any other spacecraft was permitted to leave the planet. One thin, flat, official letter was probably the only postal matter in it. It was most likely the Manaos' government's answer to the threat.

Other things fitted in. If the *Bear* was both privateer and pirate, it would know the Loren spaceport and its personnel. It would know that the already-captured *Cytherea* could be sent there to pick up mail with no real danger of not being able to leave again. The fact that all interstellar communications travelled by ship made such an arrangement the only practical one. The other, extraneous at-

tempt to stop the *Yarrow* near the double yellow sun simply proved that the pirates couldn't communicate with each other over vast distances. Apparently they got their supplies and information and delivered their loot—and now prisoners—at some base somewhere. Not all of them would be fully informed at any one time. The ship by the double star wasn't.

But the lack of any information about where that base might be—and a base was necessary—was frenziedly frustrating. Trent fiercely demanded information about the contacts of the *Bear's* crew on Loren when as a privateer she happened to be in port. If the crewmen were recruited from the local population—

They weren't. The *Bear* had appeared off Loren two years before. Its skipper proposed a deal to the local authorities. The *Bear* offered to act as a privateer for Loren, artificially supplying the planet with off-planet goods. Loren would pay for them in *ghil* fibre on presentation of the receipts the *Bear* would give its victims. It would be a process for forcing the trade that Loren's economic crisis had driven away. To have even the color of lawfulness, of course, a privateer had to be owned on the planet for which it seized goods. So Marian's father had formally pur-

chased the *Bear*, but it was strictly a legal fiction. The *Bear's* skipper was her true owner. The *Bear* had brought in some cargoes. It got information and some supplies from Loren. But no man of its crew belonged there. There was nothing to be learned about their actual base from casual hints they'd dropped. They hadn't dropped any.

It was a dead-end query. It led nowhere. But nobody else on Loren had thought to ask even that. Trent surrendered Marian's letter to the authorities. It proved that she should have been aboard the *Cytherea*. The behavior of that ship proved that it had been captured, unquestionably while she was aboard. Her father became as horror-struck as Trent assured himself he wasn't. All the resources of Loren were immediately available for anything that could conceivably be done. And Trent became automatically the man to whom proposals were offered and suggestions made and questions were presented.

He had questions of his own. He gave orders for a study of every bit of information about every planet within a light-century. The Galactic Directory wouldn't tell if there were one whose colonists had ceased to have normal space-communication with the rest of the Pleiads—the reason, pirates—or else

one which could have had a pirate's base built on it. The second alternative was not too likely. Criminal enterprises are inherently destructive. A specially built base would be constructive. It would mean investment of capital—in fact, construction. The idea of building something would be alien to a piratical enterprise. It wouldn't be done.

The searching of records was a reasonable idea, but it was based on the assumption that pirates would maintain their ships in the manner of ship-owners—keeping them in repair. But pirates wouldn't keep ships in repair. Instead, they'd abandon them for better-found ships as they captured them. So the urgent search of records was apparently futile.

But the news of such quests did bring one of the *Yarrow's* crewmen to Trent with an observation he'd made while the *Cytherea* was aground. He'd heard, naturally, of the search for a probably tiny colony whose landing-grid was at the service of pirates. He was one of the salvage-crew Trent had recruited for the *Hecla*. He'd been making a final weld on the *Yarrow's* bow-plates when the *Cytherea* touched ground. He'd seen lumps of frozen mud on the tips of her landing-fins. He came to Trent to report that wherever the *Cytherea* had been, it hadn't been to a

Pleiad spaceport. He knew the Pleiad spaceports. They were solidly paved. The *Cytherea* had landed somewhere where there wasn't a landing-grid. She'd landed by rockets, ordinarily an emergency landing-system only. She'd taken off again. There was mud on her landing-fins. So there was no use looking for a known spaceport that pirates might have seized.

Trent barked orders. He had no authority to give orders, but nobody else had orders to give. He was obeyed. He sent a ground-car burning up the highway to the *ghil* plantation he'd visited only hours earlier. The scientist there—the biologist—the botanist—the student of plant ecology, with specimens of vegetation from thirty other planets growing in plastic cubicles. . . . Get him! Bring him here right away!

And Trent went out on the spaceport tarmac to see if by any possible chance any fragments of that mentioned mud had been left behind by the *Cytherea*.

He was, as it happened, just in time to keep tidy-minded spaceport employees from cleaning up and disposing of the left-behind mud as refuse.

It was nearly an hour before the white-haired scientist arrived from the *ghil*-plantation research laboratory. Trent was pacing up and down, his hands

clenching and unclenching, alternating between rage that he hadn't been at the spaceport when the *Cytherea* came in—she'd never have lifted off again without a fight—and bitter despair because all his most appalling suspicions seemed to have been proven true.

Meanwhile the lumps of soil from the *Cytherea*'s landing-fins melted. Exposed to a vacuum, water boils, and in boiling loses heat, so that when a certain portion of it has boiled away the remainder becomes ice. The first human-made artificial ice was made by the operation of a vacuum-pump on a flask of water. Wherever the *Cytherea* had landed before Loren, mud sticking to her fins had been carried away, frozen solid in space. It remained firmly fixed until the slight shock of landing on the Loren tarmac jolted it loose. The now-softened fragments amounted to a total of nearly a bushel of topsoil and plant-fragments.

The ground-car with the *ghil*-plantation scientist arrived. Trent stood tensely by while he examined the material that had come so close to being thrown away. The examination was exhaustive, done with pursed lips and an air of intense but academic interest. At long last he shook his head.

"I've plant-samples from thirty worlds," he said regretfully,

"but not from this one. Most interesting! This thready specimen is functionally a congener of grasses, a ground-cover plant. This one—I've never seen this leaf-shaped or this triform stem before, and this—" He shook his head. "It looks like part of a symbiotic unit. Perhaps its companion-organism—"

"Where's it from?" demanded Trent.

"I haven't the least idea," said the scientist ruefully. "Not the least idea! But I hope I can take these specimens! They've been frozen, but possibly there may be spores or—or something that in a proper environment will revive and develop. They're most interesting!"

"We've got to know the planet they came from!" snapped Trent. "We've got to!"

The short man again shook his head. "Nobody knows all the plants in the galaxy," he said in mild defensiveness. "Nobody! But of course—It's from a planet very nearly the size of this one. The stalks would be thinner on a lighter world, and thicker where the gravity was greater. The sun is type G, because of the exact variant of chlorophyl that has this special tint to use that kind of light. The cell-forms suggest a trace of sulphur dioxide in the atmosphere—not much, but a trace. And the soil says conclusively that there is much volcan-

ic activity, because it contains volcanic ash in every stage of disintegration from fresh ash to —hmm—sludge. —But I bore you!”

“Keep on!” said Trent.

“The temperature range,” said the short man, “would be of the order of fifteen to forty-five degrees centigrade, which one knows by the evaporation-rates the leaf-surfaces imply. The planet’s axis will be nearly at a right angle to the ecliptic, because there are practically no seasons, and I’d estimate the annual rainfall at about two meters per standard year.” Then the ecologist said apologetically, “But that’s all. I’m sorry I can’t tell you anything really useful! But there simply isn’t any information to tell what planet this material comes from.”

Thirty minutes later the *Yarrow* lifted off to space from the Loren landing-grid. When it was well on its way, Trent painstakingly read in the Galactic Directory for this sector. He’d studied every planet within a light-century with no reason to guess at one rather than another, until the plant-ecologist told him. He read:

... mass approximately 1/325000 sol. Acceleration due to gravity, 975 cm-sec. Solar const. 1.94 small cal. min. Mean bar. press. 794 mm. mercury. Rotation period 26.30 hr.

Atm. 72.6% N, .27.5% O. .08% CO₂. .04% SO₂. . . .”

The description in the Directory was of a planet not individually named, but known as Kress Three because it lay in the third orbit out from the sun called Kress. It was the only planet within a hundred light-years whose physical constants matched the description given by the mud dropped from the *Cytherea*’s fins. The *Yarrow* drove for it with all the speed two overdrive-coils in one ship’s hull could make possible.

* * *

It was related of one of the earlier known explorers, back on ancient Earth, that when bound across what was then believed a boundless sea, he encouraged his frightened crew by discovering floating tree-branches in the ocean. They must have come from land, and could only have come from land ahead.

Captain Trent of the *Yarrow* had better information and a totally different purpose. But he was as much relieved when on the second day out from Loren the *Yarrow*’s drive-detector reported another ship in overdrive within detector-range. The other ship was ahead. Captain Trent cut down his speed, and overhauled the other spacecraft in a very leisurely fashion. He caught up with it, but at a discreet distance to one side. There

was no question of blowing drives. The *Yarrow* went by, slowly, as if only very slightly faster than its unseen companion. The other ship neither sheered off nor closed in. Had it been a merchantman, it would probably have sheered off. A pirate might have closed in. Doing neither, and yet moving on the same course, each identified the other to its own satisfaction. Trent was confident that the other ship was the *Cytherea*, bound for the pirate's base of operations. Very probably the *Cytherea* identified the *Yarrow* as that pirate vessel presumably receiving the attentions of an armed ship from Loren, back by the double yellow sun.

The *Yarrow* went on. It passed the *Cytherea* and left it astern. In due time the *Cytherea's* drive-whine ceased to register on the *Yarrow's* detector. Trent had made no move against it, yet only a relatively short time ago he'd have abandoned all else and turned toward it. He'd have blown its drive and blasted a way into it with shaped charges if it hesitated to surrender, and he'd have gone raging through it like death itself. But that was when he believed Marian aboard it.

Now he was sure she wasn't. Because the *Cytherea* had landed somewhere between its capture and its call for mail on Loren. It

would have landed to put off prisoners—most probably—and cargo—certainly—to have her light for her errand. With no cargo she was safe against stoppage by any burdened vessel. So Trent was confident that if Marian had been alive so long after the *Cytherea's* capture, she'd been landed on the world of the botanical specimens from her landing-fins. And in passing her as he'd done, Trent had gotten an exact bearing to her destination—which was his. But he wasn't through with her yet.

His thinking in this case was singularly like that of a long-ago ancestor trying to locate a certain hidden harbor. He'd sailed parallel to another ship bound there for three days in succession, with only the other ship's topmasts visible from his cross-trees. Then he was sure of the line, and crowded on more sail and drew ahead. He went on to a certain coast, dropped anchor there, and furled his sails so that he was practically invisible against the tree-clad hills behind him. And he waited until the other ship arrived, completely unsuspecting, and entered a very narrow inlet from the sea. Then Captain Trent followed and carried out his belligerent enterprise with very great satisfaction.

That was very much like what Trent intended now. He knew

the world to which the *Cytherea* should be bound. But he needed a guide to the exact spot, the precise location, the exact place among scores of millions of square miles of planetary surface to which pirate ships would resort. Finding a black grain on a sandy beach would be a promising project by comparison. But Trent left the *Cytherea* behind and went on to Kress Three to do something—without knowing it—very nearly like what his ancestor had done.

McHinny came into the control-room, humiliated and desperate. He wanted Trent's promise to try out his marvellous pirate-frustrating invention once more. During the waiting-time on Loren he'd taken no part in the repair-work. He'd labored frantically to rebuild his gadget yet again. It had been tried when the *Hecle* was under attack by pirates. It blew itself instead of the pirate's drive. It had been tried a second time near the double yellow star. Again it blew itself, and Trent won that encounter by using a doubled overdrive coil. Now it was rebuilt for a third test in combat. It couldn't be said that McHinny was resolved. He wasn't. He was frantic to force the acceptance of his genius. He was truculent, waspish and bitterly defensive, but he'd built the contrivance all over again. Now, he said defiant-



ly, he'd found the weakness in his former design.

The trouble was that he hadn't allowed for a Lawlor drive in operation in the ship his device was to make helpless. When demonstrated before the *Yarrow's* owners, it was tested against a ship in overdrive, but not moving. It was lying in an overdrive field which kept it out of normal space. With a Lawlor drive operating in overdrive, the gadget blew itself out, but with the new modification, it would blow out both the pirate's overdrive and the Lawlor drive too. Not only was the weak point eliminated but the device thus became an infinitely better weapon against pirates.

It was not his nature to be humble or to ask a favor. He was much more likely to be scornful and to demand. But this time he was nearly human. He asked almost tearfully for one more chance to prove his device—hence his genius.

"All right," said Trent. He felt impatient. "If the opportunity offers, we'll try it again. But only if the opportunity offers! What we're about is too tricky to let us take any chance we can avoid."

McHinnny couldn't refrain from a truculent statement: "You won't be taking any chances this time!"

Trent nodded. He was impatient. He was very, very busy. He had to keep himself from hoping on Marian's account. He had to remind himself that she was undoubtedly dead. He had to keep his mind furiously busy lest it begin to spin out reasons to hope. And what he had to do was not to be carried out by a man deceiving himself in any fashion. It had to be arranged and carried out in cold blood, with only one purpose—an utterly ruthless and merciless destruction of any man however remotely connected with pirate operations in the Pleiads.

It happened, though, that he was deceiving himself. In actual cold blood he wouldn't have felt the deep hatred and killing-hunger that filled him. He wouldn't

have experienced moments when his voice was thick with fury, though he denied it, and when his hands tended to clench and unclench of themselves as if lusting to do murder. But he was able to tell himself that this was not on Marian's account alone. This was righteous fury, normal hatred, the reaction of any honorable man to the fact that pirates made a business of murder for their strictly personal benefit.

And, whether in cold blood or hot, his brain worked well enough. He got the *Yarrow* into orbit around Kress Three without provoking any sign that she had been detected. He even found a hiding-place for her in a peculiar, bumbling aggregation of mountain-sized boulders tumbling around the smoky planet in an orbit like a moon—which they weren't.

So far, everything was almost ludicrously simple.

* * *

The planet Kress Three was of typical third-planet size among the solar systems of type G suns. It was a little smaller than Ma-naos, and a little larger than Sira, and very nearly the same as Loren. There were, naturally, only very slight differences in gravity among the four of them. Kress Three should have had ice-caps. It didn't. Its axis was parallel to the axis of its sun, and

therefore normal to the ecliptic, and there would be no perceptible seasons such as summer or winter anywhere. Its atmosphere had a rather high CO₂ content, so the hothouse effect of carbon dioxide in trapping solar heat would operate. It would be warm. Also, there was a good trace of sulphur dioxide in its atmosphere. This meant that the seas would be acid, which modified everything. And there were volcanos.

Trent surveyed it with angry, questing eyes from the *Yarrow's* hiding-place among the mountains bumping into each other in their orbit. Down below, on the planet, there were lines of volcanos, nowhere very far from a sea. There were areas where the ground was barely visible because of local smoke. There were coastlines, here and there, where steam bubbled up and swirled hugely in white clouds, some of them scores of miles in length.

But there were no highways, which can be seen from space much sooner than cities of ordinary size. There were places, to be sure, where vegetation flourished, but also there were vast fields of lava—not all of it cold—on which certainly no plants and perhaps no bacteria could live. Trent searched feverishly. The pirate's base could not be on a plain of uncooled lava. It could hardly be where mountains

smoked and poured molten rock down their sides. There were islands in the acid seas, but they were small and unlikely places for pirates to use.

The *Yarrow* floated among the huge boulders that dwarfed her. The planet revolved underneath her. Trent fidgeted bitterly. The radar-detectors insisted that there was no radar-scanning of the sky above the unpleasant, smoky planet. Trent hadn't expected it. After all there can hardly be real discipline and hence vigilance among criminal groups except in emergencies. Radars need to be watched conscientiously. In the pirate base they simply wouldn't be, if only because they couldn't be expected to report anything near a useless planet far from any ordinary, colonized world. Only passive devices like drive detectors, calling attention to their own reports, would be really useful. So Trent had taken up this position on normal, Lawlor drive, to avoid disturbing anybody. An overdrive would have been a different matter.

Evidence for it came before the planet had made one revolution under the *Yarrow's* hiding-place in space. The space-phone speaker in the ceiling of the control-room clicked, loudly, and then a voice said: "*What ship's that?*"

The *Yarrow's* mate jumped

visibly. Trent nodded. He pointed to the space-phone cut-off. It was turned to "*Receive only.*" The *Yarrow* could receive transmissions from other ships in normal space, but the microphone would not transmit. The receiver had picked up a voice from the ground below to a ship that must just have come out of overdrive.

"*Who would it be?*" demanded another voice sourly. "*We're coming in.*"

A pause. The first voice again: "*Who's that talking?*"

The second voice, as sourly as before: "*Go to hell, will you? This is the Cytherea. Back from getting the mail on Loren. Where'm I landing?*"

"*Same place you took off from. Any trouble?*"

"*Grid man started to ask questions. We lifted by rocket. Picked up another ship's drive on the way. You hear it?*"

"*No. Nothing,*" said the first voice. "*Shoot a flare.*"

Trent took a deep breath. This was a break. He'd beaten the *Cytherea* here. She was going to land—of course—in normal space. There was no other solidity. And she was going to shoot a flare to reveal her location to the ground station so that she could be talked down, the procedure where there was no landing-grid but still a specified landing area.

He saw the flare: a strictly emergency device used when the grid-operator couldn't find a ship where it ought to be. This one was a luridly red ball of flame, giving off millions of candlepower of crimson light. Trent got it centered on a vision-screen and turned up the magnification. He saw the *Cytherea*, a glittering rounded form in emptiness.

He also heard the voices: "*You're too far east.*" That would be galactic east, of course, not east on the planet now a gibbous disk beyond the *Cytherea*. "*That's better A little more*" Then: "*Good enough. We'll fine it when you get lower. Start down.*"

Trent watched the magnified image of the *Cytherea*. It was still tiny. It dropped swiftly down toward the planet's surface. That would be the Lawlor drive helping to aim and control it on the way down, and making those fine adjustments a rocket designed for emergency use couldn't be expected to take.

Trent said over his shoulder to the mate: "Use a camera on the vision-screen. We're going to need pictures."

He watched tensely. There was a promontory jutting out into the sea. It was a good landmark. There were mountains inland. One of them smoked. The *Cytherea* went down and down, dwindling. The first voice he'd

heard made curt comments from time to time. That voice was aground. The voice from the *Cytherea* replied. Profanely.

He heard the camera clicking. The mate was photographing the vision-screen with its picture of an extremely tiny ship growing smaller and ever smaller as it descended.

Then there were heavy rocket-fumes. White smoke. The *Cytherea*'s rockets were slowing her, now, to make a gentle landing. Up to this moment they had merely checked her descent. Now they had to stop it. The Lawlor drive became more important. It could neither take a ship off nor land one, but in cooperation with rockets the results were admirable.

It landed. Rocket-fumes blew away.

The space-phone said sardonically: "*Welcome to our city! Fancy seeing you here!*"

The voice which was the *Cytherea* swore wearily. There was a clicking in the space-phone speaker. Somewhere, a phone had been turned off.

Trent found fury shaking him. Then he said evenly: "I hope those pictures came out well. We're going to need them."

The mate pulled out the long strip of film. He peeled off the paper strip of positive. He glanced at it and held it out to Trent.

"These will do," said Trent. "Get them printed as big as they'll stay sharp. They're our maps."

The mate disappeared. He looked dubious. But he would manage somehow to get the small, self-developed pictures reproduced. In the ordinary course of business, written records were normally photocopied as routine. The mate went to wrestle with the copier. Trent pressed the all-hands button, and his voice echoed through every compartment of the ship.

"All hands," he said icily. "I'm going aground. There'll be some fighting and some loot. Anybody who wants to be ship-keeper can stay aboard. He gets no fighting and no loot. Everybody who's looking for action get set. He does get fighting and he does get loot."

He made no reference to nobler reasons for landing on a pirate-occupied planet where there would certainly be more pirates than the party the *Yarrow* could send to ground. He didn't speak of the possible rescue of prisoners whom the pirates would otherwise murder. In fact, he appealed only to the combative and the mercenary instincts of his spacemen. But that was immediately understandable. Actually, an exactly similar appeal by another ship-captain might have produced no volunteers at all.

But Trent actually had to choose two men to leave behind with the mate as ship-keepers. There'd be McHinnny left aboard, too. . . .

But for whatever reason, the crew of the *Hecla*—the salvage crew—and the crew of the *Yarrow* were ready to follow Trent anywhere. They'd been in action with him before, but their confidence in him didn't come from that. The real reason was that he'd led them in a stupendous brawl in the dives outside the Sira spaceport.

He listed the equipment he wanted each man to carry. Satchel-bombs, two per man. They were shaped-charge bombs, a type highly dependable for demolition. There were detonator-bombs, used by police for the moral effect of their sound. Trent mentioned modifications that could be made to them so that they'd have more effect though they'd be less moral. It involved nuts and bolts, broken welding-rod and scrap-iron.

They'd also carry small-arms. Rifles, yes. Pistols, definitely. As the *Yarrow's* crewmen envisioned themselves festooned with such an armament, an extraordinary atmosphere of cheer and enthusiasm developed. Trent ordered masks against their own fog-gas bombs, and he insisted that each man carry ample ammunition.

When they gathered, crowd-

ing, to get into the *Yarrow's* spaceboats, the feel of things was curiously like a forgotten incident in the life of a Captain Trent of the late eighteenth century. That Captain Trent had taken three-quarters of his ship's crew in the ship's small boats, and rowed into a harbor with them in the murky blackness of a starless, moonless, abysmally dark night. That Captain Trent was leading a cutting-out expedition nobody else would have tried. He happened to succeed.

This Captain Trent pocketed folded maps, which were actually accurate representations of the ground-surface of Kress Three. He got into the lead-boat, having given instructions to all his followers.

The spaceboats headed down for the planet. Captain Trent's expression changed when they were well on their way. There was zestful, uninformed anticipation all around him. But in the blackness of the spaceboat Trent's face went bleak.

He was thinking, of course, that this foray was too late. If he'd been here upon this errand long enough ago, it could have accomplished something. Maybe. But now it was much too late.

Marian, he assured himself bitterly, was dead.

She had to be. He couldn't have arrived in time.

The spaceboats landed within hundreds of yards of each other under a leaden sky. They'd made practically all their descent on the far side of the planet, where radar would not have spotted them, even if radar was being used by this world's pirate population. It wasn't, but Trent wouldn't risk its being turned on for some accidental reason. Then they'd come in low and barely skimmed mountain-tops with valleys in between, some of them filled with dense smoke. Finally they went down really low over the acid sea. Once, only hundreds of feet above the water, they passed a place where the circle of a volcano's crater rose only a little higher than the waves. It was like an atoll, with its lagoon hundreds of feet below sea-level and filled with surging lava instead of sea. From three separate places in the crater-rim, sea-water cascades leaped down into the depression—and turned to steam before they struck.

The three spaceboats left it behind. To keep in touch with his followers, Trent used a light-phone, invented centuries ago by the inventor of the telephone itself. It was now used mostly for ship-to-ship and ship-to-office communications in spaceports, where there was already enough interference. But it worked well

enough here, except once when they were driving through a giant cloud of condensed steam blowing across the water from some submarine source of heat.

When land appeared ahead, Trent let his small squadron drop lower and lower. In the end they flashed across an almost circular harbor with an extremely narrow exit to the sea. There was vegetation here—sparse and with that starveling appearance of all living things desperately surviving against great odds.

The spaceboats landed, kicking up clouds of volcanic ash. Trent's followers disembarked. The air smelled strongly of sulfur-fumes. Where there was volcanic activity on such a scale, there would be sulfur in every breath a man drew. One man sneezed. Another, and another.

"Use your masks," commanded Trent. "They'll take care of matters for a while. We'll probably get used to it. Now—look here!"

He spread out the enlarged copies made of the descent of the *Cytherea*. The landing-party crowded around to see. They were an extraordinary group to look at. Most of them would have made an ordinary citizen uneasy if he'd encountered them in some dark alley. There were tall men and short ones, bulky ones and spare ones. But each had the indefinable air of men

accustomed to take care of themselves. And they had a comfortable confidence in Trent.

Trent traced out items on the space-photos. "Here's the *Cytherea*," he observed, "heading down to this spot. It's sort of a pot-hole of a valley with mountains almost all around it. Here and there you'll see things that look like spires of stone. They aren't. They're ships."

Men crowded closer, staring over each other's shoulders to see the objects indicated.

"I've counted," said Trent, "and there are thirty-odd of them, counting the *Cytherea*. She landed by rocket with her Lawlor drive to help, of course. In this photo she's not yet aground. In this one she is. Here's the blast-area her rockets burned away when she hovered to land gently. See?"

There were murmurings of assent. Trent's crewmen took turns looking closely. They appeared much more piratical than pirates would. Every man had two shaped-charge satchel-bombs—they dangled from their hips—and there were grenades in their belts and bandoliers of cartridges across their shoulders. Every man had automatic pistols and a rifle.

"The point," said Trent, "is that where she landed, her rockets burned away what green stuff there was. There are seven

other ships—they look like pointed rocks—with burnt-away places around them. There's no burnt area around the rest. You see what that means?"

They waited to hear. It was not that they couldn't think, but they were content to let him do their thinking for them. A man sneezed. He'd taken off his gas-mask. He put it back on.

"When a ship's landed on rockets," Trent pointed out, "it stands in a scorched place. If it doesn't take off again, after a while the green stuff grows back. There are twenty-odd of them with the green stuff returned. They've been aground a long time—some of them maybe years."

A burly man grunted. He had a scar on his cheek.

"They brought 'em here after they captured 'em," he said confidently. "They looted 'em as they felt like it. Then they left 'em where they were."

Trent nodded. "Which means," he explained, "that we aren't up against the crews of thirty pirate ships. Those twenty-odd ships are carcasses, brought here to be rifled and then left to rust. And not all the recently landed ships are pirates, either. Some of them were brought in to be stripped. We may be up against odds of two or even three to one, but not more. And we'll have surprise on our side. We shouldn't have too

much trouble."

Grins went around the group. Nobody spoke, a good sign. Nobody needed to assure himself of his own courage.

"Now, here's our route," said Trent. "Like this."

He traced it out. He'd picked it out carefully. It could be followed easily enough by day, of course, but for night guidance he'd mentally marked down where for a mile or two they'd trudge along the seashore, and farther where an active volcano should throw a glow against the sky, and another place—

"We want to hit them just before sunrise," said Trent. "We'll be able to take a rest, I think, just this side of where we'll find them. So—Let's go!"

In minutes he was leading his file of nearly thirty men away from the landing-space. The spaceboats were partly covered by the ash in which they'd landed. Judging direction by the landmarks he'd noted, and thereby establishing a bearing for the sun, he headed toward the planet's south. He was, of course, as much burdened and as well-armed as any of his men. He led them across a rocky ridge and down on the other side again. There he found a patch of flowers. They were, as it later developed, the only blooms he was to see on the third planet out from Kress. They were utterly

white, and very large, and somehow they looked artificial. They made one think of death.

* * *

Somehow the skies were smoky, and the sun seemed redder than when seen from space. The air had the smell of sulfur, of which a very, very minute quantity seemed able to get through the gas-masks, but in time they seemed to become used to it. After the first hour or two it became rare for anyone to wear his mask more than half the time. But the sulfur smell was annoying. It came from the volcanos, of course.

They tramped, and rested, and tramped again. There were places where spindling skeleton-like trees with white bark and extravagantly spreading branches struggled to attain a height of seven or eight feet. There were other places where thready green planets—the green not quite like that of vegetation brought from Earth—covered the ground so that men's boots crushed them and left clear trails where the plants had been.

They saw no animals. It was not to be doubted that animals existed, of course. Trent himself more than once saw tiny movements out of the corner of his eyes, but he didn't actually glimpse anything that could be called an animal. Near sundown, though, as they waded through

a small brook, they saw—darting away—things that would probably be considered fish. And a mile or so further on a small thing with many legs ran away from them with a clattering sound. It was more like a crab than any other familiar creature, but one doesn't usually think of a crab as an animal.

When the sun set in smoky redness, they were marching beside an oily, sulfur-scented sea. The beach was volcanic ash. Far away giant mountains poured out thick smoke forming inky clouds that looked like blots against the sunset sky.

Night fell, and the smell of the sea made all of them keep their masks on for a great deal of the time. Without them they tended to sneeze. Trent turned on the space-phone he'd removed from a suit of space-armor. He listened. If there were any communication going on, he'd hear it. He could have heard if the *Yarrow's* mate tried to reach him from the ship. But he heard no voices nor any other sound in the space-phones.

There were things to hear when he took off the ear-pieces, though. Noises that he'd become accustomed to were suddenly loud and distinct. The landing-party was resting where they were a thousand feet above the sea when there came a deep, deep bass rumbling underground. Now, paying close heed to such

things, Trent could detect occasional tremors in the rock he rested on. And suddenly he heard a strange, rumbling sound to seaward. It came nearer. It became a bellow and then a roaring and a more-than-thunderous shout.

The sea rose below them. A volcanic tidal wave hurled itself against the shoreline. The noise was ear-shattering. It meant utterly irresistible power and thousands of millions of tons of sulfur-smelling seawater flinging itself against the land.

It subsided. For a long, long time there were trickling, pouring, washing sounds from the rocks between the landing-party and the sea. The water the tidal wave had flung upon the land was running back. The smell of the ocean was overpowering. If Trent and his followers had been in the way of that monstrous ocean movement, they'd not be alive now.

"There's always something going on, isn't there?" said Trent in a dry voice. "We might as well carry on."

He led the landing-party on through the night. They marched and stumbled, and now and again Trent looked at his watch. Then they rested for ten minutes. Sometimes there was a red glow in the sky, and the ground rumbling underfoot. Now and then there were per-

ceptible temblors. Time passed, and the stars moved westward in the smoky sky. But miles passed, too. And at long, long last they went down a ravine. They'd been so long in the darkness that starlight was now enough for them to pick their way by.

The pirate rendezvous had been inspiredly chosen. There were mountains on nearly every hand, but these peaks seemed not to be volcanos. Their edge against the stars spoke of an upheaval so gigantic that instead of a mountain a mountain-range resulted. The pirates' ships stood in a remarkably flat valley-bottom between rows of peaks. There was a partial gap to the southward, though, and very many miles away something seemed to explode. The sound of a racking detonation arrived, turned to deepest bass by the distance. The ground shook, and then a flame appeared. But instead of rising it flowed downward. It was incandescent lava pouring down a distant mountain-flank. Even so many miles away, it cast a faint light far into the valley, outlining the silent, upright ships of space.

Very quietly Trent said, "I showed you the ships you're to work on. You can be certain in the dark by feeling the ground. If there's something on the order of grass underfoot, that's wrong. The ones you want only

have ashes under them. Get set. I'll give you time. When my first bomb goes off, go ahead!"

He moved away in the dimmest of possible starshine with a single companion—the burly man with the scarred cheek. His other followers separated. Then for a long, long time there were no noises that could be attributed to them. The distant mountain exploded again. White-hot rocks rose above its peak—fire-bombs flung skyward by the titanic forces at work yonder. There were flickerings of light where the pirate ships stood upright. The intermittent glare of the eruption reached so far.

Trent and the scar-faced man went quietly through the night. It was not likely that the tumult in the distance was unusual. This world was in a state of vulcanism such as seems always to occur on third-orbit planets of type G suns, just as all such worlds are denser for their size than their sister-planets. The pirates who'd chosen this spot for their base must have accumulated the looted ships during a considerable period of time. They'd be familiar with such phenomena as went on now. Those who were asleep would hardly stir. There would not be many awake an hour before sunrise. Discipline would be of the slackest among pirates, anyhow. Secure in their hiding-place, they could-

n't be made to keep a conscientious watch except against their prisoners. And the captives would most likely have been put into a looted ship whose locks and cargo-doors could be welded shut. Imprisoned so, they could find their own food, and attend to their own necessities—and if they happened to run out of food and water in those hulks—why—there was neither any way to ask nor any hope in asking for food from the pirates.

Trent found a ship with ashes—no vegetation—around its fins. He and the burly man conferred in whispers. Trent set a satchel-bomb in place. When it went off, it should blow one of the ship's three landing-fins to scrap-metal. The ship could not stay upright on two supports. It would topple. And then they could take further action. The explosion of the first bomb would be the signal for the rest of his spacemen to begin their work. It had not been pictured to them as high or noble adventure, and they wouldn't act that way. They'd make no dramatic gestures. But they would feel a fine zest, some part of which would come of acting as a team under a leader like Trent. This was quite independent of any prospects of profit. They followed Trent. It was even more satisfying than that brawl outside the spaceport on Sira.

There were many stars shin-

ing in a smoky sky. There were distant, muted explosions on a diminished scale. Trent set the timer on the satchel-bomb. He and his companion drew off.

Seconds passed. The satchel-bomb went off. Its shaped charge flashed blue-white light and made a detonation-sound so sharp and savage that it was like a blow on the chest. Then, almost imperceptibly and with a certain enormous leisureliness, the hull of this spaceship leaned. In the first second it leaned only a little. But it gathered speed as it fell.

Before it had fallen a quarter of the way, other blue-white flashes began. Like super-super photographer's strobe-lights, they illuminated all the valley and the mountainsides about it. It would have been an impressive sight had the flashes been continuous. Twelve spaceships, pointing toward the sky, forming an indefinite cluster. Seven of them leaned, fell, struck each other, struck other ships—still upright—that crumpled or bent or went down in straightforward crashes that made the ground jump when they struck. And all this happened in the fraction of a minute.

There was a curious stillness for a moment. The lesser explosions of the mountain to southward increased. They became practically continuous. They

sounded like a distant cannonade—but no man in this generation had ever heard a cannonade save in recordings of ancient warfare. The fallen ships made strange, faint squeakings as vibrations of the ground helped them to settle in more stable relationships to each other.

Nearby someone bawled: "Cap'n! Cap'n Trent!"

Trent didn't answer. He made his way toward the voice. Twice, as he went past fallen ships, and once under a vast cylinder that had fallen across another—twice he heard batterings: men suddenly awakened by the falling of their ships, those still alive hysterically trying to escape. But many were actually trapped, and a good number of them must have died in the first explosions. Whatever might happen to Trent and his landing-party, though, these strained, twisted, racked and not infrequently torn-open ships could never be taken to space again by the pirates who'd brought them here. For one thing, they'd have to be raised to vertical positions, and equipment for that purpose couldn't be improvised.

The voice bawled again: "Cap'n! Cap'n Trent!"

It was very near. Trent called, "What's the trouble?"

"Cap'n," the voice answered anxiously, "we knocked down a ship, and it kind of split open—

and there's some women in it!"

Then a grenade went off a little distance away. A rifle cracked. A man screamed. There were other sounds of combat.

* * *

From a distance great enough to let all the grounded ships be seen at once, there would have appeared to be very little activity of any sort. There were the occasional cracklings of firearms. They made tiny sparks. Now and again—rarely, now—there were explosions of other sorts. They made flashes. Sometimes they were satchel-bombs. More often they were grenades.

Trent said shakily, "Marian! You're all right? The others—"

As if she still couldn't believe what had happened, Marian answered in a queer voice: "They put us—hostages in that ship and welded up the ports. They'd ruined the engines and the drive. They told us if the—*Cytherea* didn't bring back—agreement to their terms they'd—bring us out and—make pictures of—what happened to us—before we died. And they'd—send those tapes with word that—they'd take more prisoners and—do the same unless—"

Trent's throat was dry; it seemed to be trying to shut as if to strangle him. At the same time his voice was thick and furry with hatred.

"I said—are you all right?"

All of you?"

"We're—quite all right," she said unsteadily, "only we—don't quite believe it yet."

There were eight or ten women and three men, all released when their welded-shut ship-hull split open as it fell. Strangely enough, as prisoners waiting to be the victims of carefully photographed atrocity, they had been more fearful of the recurrent minor shocks and temblors of this valley. Instead of staying in the cabins and accommodations of the ship's bow, they'd huddled in its sternmost part, nearest to the ground. So when their ship was toppled—because, recently landed, it had scorched the ground beneath it—they were only slightly shaken up by the fall and crawled out of a lock-door that had twisted open despite its welding.

"Stay here," Trent ordered the crewmen who had found them. "Guard them until we clean up the mess!"

He hurried away again. There was still darkness everywhere, but to the east an infinitely faint, rosy fading of the sky began. To the left, a rifle on automatic fire spat spiteful sparks. Trent crouched and dashed over to it. A grenade exploded farther on.

"What's going on?" he demanded. He was filled with remarkable emotions. Marian was again out of a predicament in

which the folly of other men had involved her. He and he alone had proved capable of action to get her out. He was succeeding. "What's going on?" he demanded almost genially.

A member of the *Yarrow's* crew spat with great deliberation. "Some characters in this ship here are tryin' to get out. Three-four got out. We bagged 'em. Now the others are hollerin' crazy-like. They want to know who's shooting."

"Tell them Santa Claus," said Trent. "Why not a grenade?"

He moved away and within moments—it seemed—heard the grenade explode behind him. Now something huge loomed ahead of him: the nose of a fallen ship. He could hear noises from somewhere inside it. The control-room viewports, or some of them, had been smashed by the fall. Now a loud-speaker incredibly gave out speech from inside there. A savage, half-hysterical voice raged: "*Somehow somebody's landed here! Get to the Jocunda! Fight your way here and make it fast!*"

Somewhere in the valley an occupied pirate ship hadn't been toppled. Somewhere a freebooter remained upright, and in some manner it had become aware that the external noises were not distant detonations but nearby bombs. It called to what other ships contained their crews. To

a great degree that call was bound to be futile. But Trent had found a specific object for his hatred. In a sense this ship would be the headquarters ship of the pirates of the Pleiads. It remained aground—it had stayed aground so long that green stuff grew about its base. It would have been kept provided with fuel and air-stores, ready to be used for escape should such a thing—unthinkable—be needed. Now it called on all pirates not trapped or disabled to join it. Most of them wouldn't hear it. Space-phone units would mostly have been shattered by the long fall of the fated ships' bows. Of those who survived—such as Trent had just heard—most would be found in crushed and empty control-rooms. Men in a ship that had fallen crashing from the vertical would either be dead, or they'd be injured, or they'd be trying frantically to get out to the sulfur-smelling out-of-doors.

But there were some who'd probably gotten their warning before Trent overheard the message. If he'd kept his personal space-phone turned on, he'd have known. More, the *Yarrow's* mate, aloft with those gigantic boulders which should have been a moon, the *Yarrow's* mate would have heard the hysterical command. He'd be worried, but at least he'd know that the landing-

party was aground and was in action against the pirates.

The redness to the east grew brighter. Trent saw a man running crazily. He was not armed as the members of the landing-party were. He was in flight. He passed behind a hulk that half an hour earlier had been a spaceship at least capable of lifting itself to the sky. He reappeared, running toward the group of still and silent ships standing on green-covered ground. Somewhere a rifle racketed in automatic fire. The running man collapsed. Trent growled. He headed in that direction.

Another man. Two others. They'd been warned by space-phone, but they didn't attempt to fight. They ran like deer toward the spires that were landed and looted and rusted spacecraft. A rifle cracked on one-shot fire. It cracked again, and again. One man fell all of a heap, his arms flailing. The solitary rifle began again.

Trent couldn't stop it, so he stood still, straining his eyes in the slowly, slowly increasing crimson light to see which of the presumable hulks they fled toward. That one mustn't lift off. It mustn't!

A running man fell. More than one rifle concentrated on the last man afoot. They made popping sounds. He began to zig-zag crazily. He knew that the bullets

whining past were aimed at him. He must have known that several men were shooting in the zestful competition of a sporting event.

He fell, and rolled over and over, and lay still. But Trent had identified the supposed hulk which had been his hope of refuge. He began to gather men for an assault upon it. There was a woeful lack of satchel-bombs. Most of them had been used to admirable effect. He started toward the group of abandoned ships, one of which must be called the *Jocunda* and contain at least some of the pirates who a half-hour since had snored in their sins while Trent and his men came down into the valley.

Suddenly bright flames—monstrous flames—spurted out from beneath a rusting hull up ahead. That would be the *Jocunda*. She rose from the ground, spouting hellfire. The flames were blue-white and so intense that for long moments the increasing ruddy light of dawn seemed whitened. With its Lawlor drive giving all possible help to its rockets, it crawled, then it climbed, and then it seemed to fall toward the smoky heavens overhead. Trent watched it bitterly as it dwindled to a speck which, in the red light of sunrise, looked like a ruby in the sky.

Then he snapped on his space-

phone. He began to call: "Calling Yarrow! Calling Yarrow! Trent calling Yarrow!"

Almost instantly the mate's voice came back. It sounded relieved.

"Come in, Captain! I've been hearing some fancy stuff from aground there. You all right?"

"Yes. Some mopping up but—is McHinne's gadget set for use?"

A pause. The mate's voice again. "Yes, sir. All set!"

"There's a ship coming up," said Trent. "It got away. Tell him to try his gadget on it. He claims it'll work on a Lawlor drive too, now. If it doesn't, use our two coils to blow their overdrive."

"Yes, sir! Anything else?"

"Nothing," said Trent.

Now, and it seemed very suddenly, the sun rose in splendor and the sky became a vivid crimson all the way past the zenith. All the mountain-flanks glowed a ruddy color, and the valley of the pirate base soon filled with multiple reflections of the rosy glare.

By this time there seemed little activity of any sort. But Trent walked leisurely back to what activity there was. He picked up half a dozen men and led them into a toppled ship where they all made full use of their training in ship-board combat. When they came out—they'd

entered by a cargo-door, but exited through an air-lock—they brought three injured men. They left others behind—but they'd need burial later.

They went into a second ship. There were two shots from inside this one. A third. Trent was satisfied with the quality of their behavior, but he could see that in his presence they felt some embarrassment about looting, so he left them and put a second group of six to work on other ships.

Presently he came back to Marian. She looked tensely composed, but her eyes brightened when she saw him. She took off a space-helmet that a *Hecla*-salvage man had brought out of a ship. The former prisoners were now all supplied, and the man of the *Hecla* salvage operation looked at once complacent because of their gratitude and gloomy because he'd missed his full share of the fighting.

"I think," said Trent, "that we're doing all right. Do you know of any other prisoners?"

"We—were told there were some," said Marian. "They're welded in one of those hulks. They're—waiting as we were to be killed if the *Cytherea* didn't bring back acceptance of the pirates' terms."

Trent nodded to his followers.

"Take a torch, if you can find one," he ordered, "and look over those ships. Any that are welded

shut—cut them open and let the people out. Of course there may be one or two pirates left. Use your own judgment."

The crewmen hurried briskly and hopefully away.

Then the space-phone dangling from Trent's neck made noises: "*Calling Captain Trent! Calling Captain Trent! Yarrow calling Captain Trent!*"

Trent answered.

The mate's voice sounded exultant to a degree Trent had never heard before: "*The gadget worked, Captain! It worked! McHinny worked it himself, with the ship rising in plain view and going right past us. She cut her rockets and flicked into overdrive and we hit the overdrive-button with McHinny at the gadget in the fraction of a second afterward! And she popped back out to normal space! She's still rising, but she can't accelerate any more! Her drive and her overdrive are both blown out and she's losing velocity! She'll go up a while longer, and then she'll fall back! I figure she'll hit somewhere in mid-ocean in two and a half hours. But she'll be half-way melted down when she hits, and what's left will never come up again!*"

"I don't suppose it will," agreed Trent. "All right. Very nice work! I'll call you back later."

He turned to Marian, who had been watching him intently.

He said, "There's a lot of stuff to attend to. We have to make sure about mopping up any pirates who may still be loose. I don't think there'll be many. Then we have to get the prisoners organized, taking care of their own food and so on. There are more than a hundred of them. And we have to find out if any pirate ship is still out cruising. I don't think there will be, but with two overdrive coils in parallel the *Yarrow* can blow the drive of any other ship in space. We don't have to worry about them!"

It was not exactly the sort of speech a man would be expected to make under the circumstances. It was very business-like. In fact, he was talking business.

"Then," he said, frowning thoughtfully, "I have to post salvage-claim notices on the ships here. I have to make a formal claim that each one has been made available for recovery and repair by my actions, in my chartered ship—I've salvage rights—and by men in my employ. Actually, though, I can sell these ships where they are, the purchasers to come and repair and remove them. I may do so if I need funds. But most of them will be salvaged the way the *Hecla* was, and I'll claim salvage

on each as I did on the *Hecla*."

She listened, but her expression became a little uncertain. It was even puzzled. She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"You asked me," Trent was saying, somehow too formally, "to come and talk to your business agent and to you on Sira. I said I'd try—and then I lifted off without doing so. I should apologize."

She looked genuinely bewildered.

"But—but that doesn't matter!" she protested. "I—"

"I still have those things to attend to," said Trent. His tone was rueful. "But—"

"But what?" Marian said slowly.

"But then I'll be heading for Loren," he told her. "I'll have to arrange for other ships to come and pick up all the extra people. I—hmmm—I'll be very glad if you'll come on the *Yarrow* when I head for Loren. I can take a few other passengers. You can pick them out, if you like. And—hmm—I won't have business demands on my time between here and Loren."

She stared at him.

"In fact," said Captain Trent—and now he was really embarrassed—"in fact, I—find that I—well—would like very much to have you as my guest on the *Yarrow*. I like the way you—react to emergencies. I'd like to be

—better acquainted. I've never faced this—situation before, and I don't know how to say what I mean. I certainly haven't managed to do it so far!"

Marian's expression changed in an instant. Her bewilderment vanished, and she looked suddenly and radiantly understanding.

"But—I think you did!" She was smiling now. "I think you said it beautifully! I'd—like to say the same thing as well as you did. Will you—pretend that I have?"

Trent now looked acutely uncomfortable yet very much relieved. "We'll talk it over on the way to Loren."

Then he turned away and headed toward some of his men climbing out of a shattered hull, their arms loaded with booty.

Marian smiled after him. She wasn't in the least puzzled now. In fact, she was wearing an expression that could be called perfect confidence.

* * *

On the way to Loren, McHinnny insisted that he wanted to show Trent how beautifully his for-the-third-time reconstructed pirate-frustrator worked. He explained that a part he'd used in building the unit for the *Yarrow* had required a certain amount of induction. The

idea was that current flowing from the bus-bars to the capacitors had resistance to overcome in the first microseconds of current flow. Therefore the capacitors charged gradually, without overload of the current-cables. But the manufactured article in the *Yarrow's* unit had been defective. With no inductive resistance to control the current going into the gadget, it amounted to a short-circuit. The gadget had blown every time. It couldn't be avoided.

But on the way to the pirate base, McHinnny said truculently, the possibility had occurred to him. He'd installed another inductance-unit in his gadget. Consequently he'd destroyed the one pirate that would otherwise have escaped. Trent opened his mouth to make a correction. The fleeing pirate ship wouldn't have escaped. The mate had orders to blow it with the *Yarrow's* overdrive if McHinnny's gadget didn't work. But then Trent shrugged. It didn't matter.

Now McHinnny wanted to show Trent how it worked. Trent took Marian to watch. McHinnny swelled with importance and the confidence natural to genius. He threw the charging-switch.

And the gadget blew itself to hell and gone.

This novel will be published in the winter by Ace Books under the title

"SPACE CAPTAIN"

DISCUSSIONS

Dear Editor:

With the re-introduction of a letter department (why not—for old time's sake—name it "Discussions"?), you have made Amazing (and I trust, soon, Fantastic) the readers' magazine.—I agree with reader Benyo—S-F for Amazing, fantasy for Fantastic. If you took a poll, I believe that would be the consensus. . . . Please re-instate book reviews and keep the editorials slanted toward science fiction, à la Gernsback's editorials in the late lamented S-F Plus. If I want to know the latest developments in science, I can always read Science News Letter. Editorials in science-fiction magazines should be about science fiction.

David Charles Paskow
817 W. 66th Ave.
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● All right, for old time's sake (just as it was named when first begun in the January, 1927 issue), from now on you will be writing to "Discussions." As for the editorials, you focus exactly on the heart of our view. That's why the October editorial was on the Dean of Science Fiction, and this one on Science Fiction under fire.—Editor.

Dear Editor:

I was beginning to think "pulp" magazines were a thing of the past until I came across your August issue of Amazing. The reading material was of the highest order, and not just some of it but all of it. And this pleasantly surprised me, and set me to thinking about the time when Pulp was in its prime, when today's marvels were first thought of and dreamed about, when names like Nowlan and Burroughs were commonplace instead of memories; and I had missed it all by about 15 years. In fact, had it not been for paperback reprints of some of the old "pulp" novels, I'd have missed Pulp completely. And now, suddenly, Amazing is mixing the best of the good old Pulp with today's best stories.

Even though your August issue of Amazing was nearly perfect, it had the effect on me of being almost too good and I couldn't imagine how the next issue could be anything but mediocre, since I figured you'd brought to bear all your big guns for your first issue since Ziff-Davis gave up publication. But I subscribed anyway and received your October issue yesterday. I don't know how you did it, but it's better than the

August issue

W. F. Wilbert
23704 E. 2nd
Liberty Lake, Wash.

● You're right. We did use all our big guns for the August issue, but we went looking for even bigger ones to go off in October. And what do you think about their size in this issue? New stories by Cordwainer Smith and Murray Leinster—and a classic, rich in Pulp flavor, by Hamilton.—Editor.

Dear Editor:

First of all, let me congratulate you on your first issues of Amazing and Fantastic. They were indeed the best in quite a long time. Second, I hope that your future issues will be up to par with these two. Now that the two magazines have a new management, what are the chances for an annual anthology from each (or combined)? It seems a shame that the two greatest magazines in the field do not have a yearly (or even an irregularly appearing) anthology series.

Larry L. Rooney
2943 Featherston Ave.
Wichita Falls, Texas

● We agree. We're long overdue—but a number of things are in the works. For a sample you might try Great Science Fiction from Amazing, No. 1. (Details are given elsewhere in this issue.) It should be on sale by the time you read this.—Editor.

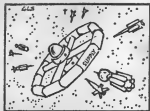
Dear Editor:

I am greatly impressed by your first issues of Amazing and Fantastic. . . . The return to the former Amazing logo is an admirable move. For the first time in a year and a half, the magazine looks touched by human hands. . . . Advice: Go monthly as soon as possible, but not before. Don't sacrifice quality for quantity. Establish a personality. Be distinctive. Why should Campbell have a monopoly on significant editorials? And bring back the letter column.

. . . I guess all I really wanted to say was that I like the way you have put back together two disintegrating magazines. Keep it up and I see a Huga sitting in your office in a few years.

Alan Shaw
20-35 Seagirt Blvd.
Far Rockaway, N.Y. 11691

● Our thanks—but you set pretty high standards, almost as high as those we've tried to set for Amazing.—Editor.



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